

THE LAST PARRAKEET

GEORGE INNESS HARTLEY





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THE LAST PARRAKEET

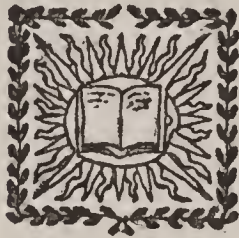


"Hold on there, Skinny," he said, "these feathers are n't in the same position as when we left"

THE LAST PARRAKEET

BY
GEORGE INNESS HARTLEY
Author of "Boy Hunters in Demerara," "The Importance
of Bird Life," etc.

ILLUSTRATED BY
DONALD TEAGUE



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CHAPTER I

MR. WHITEHOUSE OF FLORIDA

“**I**T does n’t resemble the jungle much, does it, Fat?”

Only six hours before, for the first time in a full twelvemonth, the two boys had set foot on their native Broadway. The never-to-be-forgotten bustle of the great city, the inconceivable turmoil, the honking of automobile horns, the clang of surface-cars, yes, and the thin blue haze of gasoline fumes and oil, requited the longing which had reposed in their breasts for many months past. New York City did more than that. The rush, the systematic confusion, the hurrying crowds, filled them with awe and not a little trepidation. So long had they been absent from the seething metropolis that its daily ways were

no longer their ways. They had lost the city habit. The rapidity with which life there moved found them unaccustomed and almost fearful.

For months the boys had tramped the Brazilian wilds, wandered lost through vast Amazonian swamps, and more than once had escaped alive by the merest intervention of Providence coupled with their own good hard common sense. In Demerara they had hunted and killed the giant armadillo; in Peru they had nearly succumbed to thirst on an arid plateau; and on the costal islands of that great country they had been attacked by guano pirates. And now the two of them, Paul Jenkins and Fred Milton, had returned to their native city—and were afraid.

"I'd rather buck up against a wounded jaguar any day than try to cross a street through this traffic!" Paul declared, staring in dismay at the endless streams of taxicabs, trucks, and touring-cars which swept past the curb in apparent reckless confusion.

Fred gave a hearty nod. "So would I, Fat," he ruefully agreed, placing a thin,

weather-browned hand on the shoulder of his stout, equally tanned chum. "It's different from anything we've lately been used to. Great Day! I don't remember that it was as bad as this! Crossing a street here is worse than trying to swim one of the cataracts in Demerara. I say let's stay on *this* side of the avenue."

"You've read my identical thought, Skinny," chuckled Paul, "though how are we going to reach the up-town subway if we don't cross over? Talk about dangers of the jungle, for real thrills give me Broadway in the early evening! The jungle is a calm, sleepy bit of New England woodland compared to this."

"I suppose we'll have to get used to it in time," said Fred, smiling, "so let's commence now."

Awaiting a lull in the relentless, speeding stream, they presently darted across the broad thoroughfare and reached the far side without mishap. There they proudly paused, as if at the successful performance of a perilous act, and looked back.

"Phew!" ejaculated Fred, half-humor-

ously shaking his head and drawing a deep breath, "those fellows don't slow down for any one."

Paul uttered a short laugh and, jerking his head toward an approaching automobile, said: "Look at that machine full of people staring at us. They think we're a pair of rubes just come to town; and I reckon they're just about right."

There were several blocks to be traversed before the first subway entrance could be reached, and the pair continued on foot up Broadway. Midway on their journey they halted, held by the sudden clanging of a bell and the harsh wail of a siren. As if at the touch of a magic wand an open passage appeared in the street; the rushing traffic paused in mid-air, as it were, and crowded close to the curb. A monstrous fire-engine whizzed by, belching smoke from its burnished superstructure, to be followed a minute later by a great, fiery-red hook-and-ladder which swayed drunkenly as it roared toward them.

An old gentleman, who had stood near the

boys while the engine surged past, pushed through the barrier of waiting vehicles and started across the open space. Half-way across he was startled by the warning clang of the approaching hook-and-ladder, and paused uncertainly, bewildered by the sudden din, while the roaring, shrieking, swaying truck bore down upon him.

But before it could reach him, the man dimly realized that two boyish figures had appeared beside him, one short and rotund, the other taller and thin. He felt himself seized by the arms and was dragged aside just as the metallic monster tore by. An instant later he stood safe on the sidewalk between the two boys. Broadway returned to life. A hundred cars surged forward as one.

"That was a narrow escape, sir," Paul declared a trifle breathlessly with a half-smile. "The fire department stops for nothing."

The man they had rescued was old, approaching his seventieth year, with long white hair partly hidden by a broad-brimmed felt hat. His clothes were of good

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tailored cut, but, as one could see, foreign to New York. Even before he spoke the boys were certain that the city was not his home.

The old gentleman said nothing for a moment. He seemed too dazed for coherent thought. Then, gathering his scattered faculties together, he nodded to his rescuers, and a twinkle entered his eyes.

"Yes, suh, I reckon you are right about that," he said dryly. "I wish to thank you two gentlemen fo' saving my life; yes, suh, you did!"

He drew a deep breath, and continued: "I am deeply beholden to both of you. As you may have judged, I am not used to such a whirlwind of flying vehicles as you see over there, and I quite lost control of my movements. I should never have left my ranch."

"Texan, probably," thought Fred; then aloud: "Shall we hail a cab for you, sir? Perhaps after your experience you'd rather ride to your destination?"

"Thank you, suh, I would!" The man chuckled outright. "I'll ride this hyar range in a car after this."

"You come from the West?" politely inquired Paul.

"No, suh! The South is my home—Thrasher, Florida—and I 'm returning there to-morrow."

"But you spoke about a ranch?"

"Yes, suh, I did; the Thrasher ranch, Thrasher, Florida."

"But, sir, I thought ranches were found only in the West. Do you raise cattle?"

"Indeed I do, suh; a good many thousand head. The Thrasher covers some fifty thousand acres, and I don't know exactly how many head I own."

"By Jove!" murmured Fred in amazement, "that 's a new one on me! Are there many similar ranches there?"

"Bless yo' hearts, my boys," laughed the old man, laying a kindly hand on the shoulder of each, "of course there are! More than half the State is used as a cattle-range, millions of acres. There must be a score of ranches larger than mine, though they don't always call them ranches. But the cattle are not as good as those that come from the West. They

don't grow over-fat; but we manage to eke along somehow," he added with a smile.

"Where is the ranch?" inquired Fred, during a pause. "In what part of the State?"

"Quite a bit south of Tampa, on the gulf coast. Part of it runs clear into the Everglades."

"Those must be interesting," ventured Paul.

The old gentleman laughed softly. "They are, suh," he said, "if you like alligators and diamond-back rattlesnakes, with a few cottonmouths and a lot of herons and a stray parra-keet thrown in. The Glades are not considered over-healthy."

"Those are just what we do like," returned Fat. "Not the unhealthy part but the 'gators and herons and all those things. We have just returned from a long collecting trip for just that kind of thing in South America."

"Have you, now?" was the hearty response. "That *is* interesting. May I venture to ask if you were successful?"

The boys gave a short sketch of their adventures, speaking of their interest in natural science and their insatiable thirst for jungle

lore. The man listened, evidently charmed by the way in which they told their story. At its conclusion a taxicab, in answer to a beckoning finger from Fred, drew up to the curb, and the old gentleman prepared to enter.

“You must come and visit me some time, young suhs,” he said. “The door of the Thrasher is always open to you whenever you decide that the Everglades need exploring. My name is Robert C. Whitehouse, at yo’ service, suhs, and yours are—?”

A few moments later, with a final wave of the hand to his new friends, Mr. Whitehouse bade the chauffeur drive on. A whir of tired gears, and the taxi was lost in the maelstrom of traffic. The boys watched until it disappeared and then continued their interrupted walk to the subway.

CHAPTER II

FIVE THOUSAND DOLLARS REWARD FOR A PARRAKEET

SEVERAL weeks slipped by, and the incident on Broadway entirely passed from the minds of the two young naturalists. Their time was wholly taken up with hard work in the museum laboratory to which they were attached. Thousands of bird-skins must be unpacked, hundreds of mammal skeletons, and there were countless hordes of dried insects to be sorted over. The recent journey to the South American jungle had been fruitful, and the collection was one of the finest and most complete that had ever been taken for the museum.

When the skins had been unpacked they must be placed in groups according to the locality in which they had been collected, and then the real labor would begin. Each speci-

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men must be given a name, and each name must be the correct one.

So commenced the work of comparison. A dozen books of descriptions were required, and scores of older, already named "type" specimens. Slowly the scientific names appeared on the hitherto blank labels, but at best it was tedious work. Now and again a new species was discovered which, until the present moment, had been unknown to science, and then the skin was subjected to a most minute description carefully written down by each of the lads in turn and afterward compared to make certain that it was correct. This description was put aside to take a conspicuous place in the detailed report on the collection which later must be submitted to the museum.

But Fred and Paul found that their time in the laboratory was not entirely consumed in this everlasting work of cataloguing and describing. More than once during the six weeks they remained there packages were brought in for inspection which contained sheaves of feathers, bird-plumes. On one day it would be feathers of the bird of para-

dise, on another the nuptial plumes of the snowy egret, or the gorgeous plumage of a brilliant-hued oriental pheasant. At such times the boys dropped the dried skins and, with the aid of other members of the Museum staff, strove to determine the species of bird from which the feathers originated. It was not a game they were playing, but an effort to aid Uncle Sam's customs service.

The practice of smuggling any particular object is as ancient as the first law which forbade the importation of that material. For nearly a generation now, the killing of egrets for their plumes within the United States or the importation of their feathers had been forbidden by federal law. In the same way birds of paradise and the plumage of numerous other birds foreign to this continent have been forbidden ingress. Despite the law, however, smuggling still goes on at a great rate, and the customs-house inspectors find their positions filled with much trial and trouble. The smugglers may assert that the plumes do not come from egrets, or birds of paradise, or crowned pigeons; and then the

poor inspector must prove that they do. Hence he resorts to expert advice obtained mainly from a museum or zoölogical park.

One fine spring morning when the boys' thoughts rambled out of doors toward some sunny stretch of grassy meadow, as thoughts often do in May, a more formidable bundle than usual was delivered at the laboratory and carried to them for inspection. Uttering a sigh of complete boredom, Fred untied the string and opened the package.

"This is the third one this week," he grumbled, spreading the feathers on the long counter in front of him. "Why do people have to keep on breaking the law and make other people work themselves to death to detect them? It would be easier in the first place for every one concerned if they'd let the birds live."

"There are a good many thousand women lookin' for hat-plumes, Skinny," rejoined Paul, stifling a yawn and grinning, "and the plume-hunter don't like to disappoint 'em; that's the reason. Hullo, these are different from the usual kind sent here."

Instead, as they had expected, of the mass

of lacy, white feathers of the snowy egret which a majority of the customs seizures contained, these were of a reddish tint. Sprinkled among them, however, were a few white aigrets, a number of great blue wings, and many nondescript skins.

"Red egrets!" exclaimed Fred, picking up one of the delicate dark-tinted plumes and examining it in the light of a window. "I wonder where they got them. The birds are extremely rare, almost on the verge of extinction. Whew, whoever collected these must have gotten into a rookery! What a shame it is that there are people in the world who will do a thing like that!"

"It sure is!" growled Paul, with an indignant snort. "There must be two dozen of these plumes alone, besides all the rest. Yes, sir, I would like to wring the neck of the chap who did it."

"I'd help you with great pleasure," savagely agreed Fred. "And look at the wings! Here are ten belonging to the great blue heron and several to the little green."

He laid the aigrets in a separate pile and the wings in another. Beside them he deposited the skins of half a dozen red cardinal-birds.

"It's a cinch to tell where all of these came from," he observed.

"Where, Skinny?"

"Florida! I guess about the only place where there are any red egrets left is in that State or Texas, and, as I said, they're mighty scarce. And these big wings which I said belonged to great blues are really from the Ward's heron, which is the Southern variety of the great blue. Gemini, if we can't stop the people from hunting plumes in our own country, we ought not to kick about them doing it in other countries!"

"What kind do you call this?" demanded Paul, picking up a pair of small green wings tinged with bright yellow at the bend, to which adhered bits of skin bearing tufts of pale green feathers. "Looks to me as if they had come from some sort of parrot, don't you think?"

"By Jove!"

What Fred further intended to reply was cut short by the entrance of a uniformed attendant.

"Dr. Keene would like to see both of you young gentlemen in his office, at once," the man said, and, casting a keen glance at the feathers on the counter, left them.

"Wonder what 's up now?" muttered Paul. "Have any idea, Skinny?"

The other shrugged his shoulders. "About our report, I suppose," he hazarded carelessly. "Come on."

They were shortly ushered into the presence of the head of the museum. Dr. Keene, a man of near sixty took a fatherly interest in all the members of the staff, and Fred Milton and Paul Jenkins held not the lowest place in his affections. Jack Milton, Fred's brother, was still away in South America, and during his absence Dr. Keene had taken the boys, so to speak, under his wing.

"Sit down," he invited kindly, and when they had found chairs he broached the subject of the consultation with an abrupt question.

"How would both of you like to take another trip?"

For a moment the lads were so taken aback by the sudden inquiry that they could find no answer. Finally Fred managed to stammer, "V-very good, sir!"

Dr. Keene vouchsafed him a kindly smile and, speaking rapidly, began to question them concerning their work.

"Are you nearly finished with your collection?"

The boys in turn were forced to smile at this. "No, sir," quietly replied Paul, "we're merely at the beginning. There are several months' work still ahead."

"Too bad, too bad," grumbled the old man, forcing back a twinkle which had crept into his eyes. "A very important matter has come up which requires immediate attention, and I hoped you would be far enough along—"

"We are, sir," eagerly broke in Fred; "we can leave at any time you say."

"But, my dear boys, you still have your collection to work up. Are you willing to leave it to some other man?"

"B-but, sir—" began Fred.

"There, there, I see you are not. Too bad; you were the very persons to undertake the job."

"What do you wish us to do?" bravely inquired Paul, swallowing hard.

"Nothing, sir; oh, nothing at all. It does n't matter; I will send some one else."

"But I 'm sure, sir, we could—" began both lads at once.

Dr. Keene slapped his knee and broke into a roar of laughter. "Of course you can!" he chuckled. "But you must let an old man have his joke. Your collection can wait. I 'm going to send you away at the first of the week."

"You don't mean, sir, that we 're to be discharged?" came the anxious query from Fred.

"Bless your heart, no!" answered the old gentleman with another chuckle. "I am going to send you both to Florida; or, rather, I will give you a leave of absence to do so if you desire."

"Florida?"

"Yes, gentlemen, you will prepare to go south on a short collecting expedition. That

means supplies and all perquisites for a month in the field. You don't need to be advised in that respect. Here is the why and wherefore of the trip.

"At a recent meeting of the United Ornithological Societies a question was brought up concerning the Carolina parrakeet, now supposed to be extinct. The last of these birds ever authentically seen was in the Everglades some twelve or fifteen years ago when a small flock of about a score were observed in the northerly part of that swamp region. From that day to this not a single specimen has been reported. The chances are a hundred to one that they are entirely extinct, though fifty years ago they were common even as far north as the Virginian coast."

"Why, sir—" interrupted Fred; but Dr. Keene cut him short with a wave of the hand, and continued:

"The U. O. S. have offered a prize of five thousand dollars to the person or persons who can offer proof that the parrakeets still exist; and that is the object of this expedition. Both of you are in need of a vacation, and I thought

that you might be willing to spend it in Florida for the sake of earning—that is, if you are fortunate enough to discover the birds—five thousand dollars. What do you think of it?”

“Great!” cried Fat, almost in a joyous shout. “When did you say that we ’d better start, Dr. Keene?”

“As soon as possible, Paul. If the birds are there, the sooner you locate them the better off you will be. Both the Union Museum and the big museum in Chicago are sending men, so it will be a race between you. May the best one prosper, and, remember, it is as much for the honor of our own museum as for the money that you go. And, another thing, don’t forget that the parrakeets are probably extinct and that all three expeditions are likely to meet with failure.”

“Not ours, sir!” eagerly cried Fred. “The parrakeets are there; I know it!”

“It ’s well to be optimistic,” smiled the doctor.

“Of course I ’m optimistic, and I ’ve good reason to be,” returned the boy with happy

emphasis. "I say those birds are not extinct!"

"How do you know?" queried the man, a bit puzzled by the boy's earnestness.

"I 've seen a comparatively fresh skin of one this very day!"

The doctor almost bounded from his chair in astonishment. "What do you mean?" he demanded, now almost as excited as Fred.

"The wings and part of the skin came to the laboratory from the custom-house this afternoon, mixed with a lot of red egret plumes and miscellaneous feathers. We were just examining it when you sent for us."

"You are sure of its identity?" roared Dr. Keene.

"Positive, sir."

"By Jove, sir, then that settles it! If that skin did n't come from the last living parra-keet, then there must be others. You don't know exactly where it did come from?"

"No, sir, but we know positively that it came from Florida."

"All right, then, Fred and Paul, get ready to start as soon as you are able. We'll keep the secret of that skin dark for the present. If

it became public property, the Everglades would be overrun in a week with people trying to earn that five thousand dollars. We want you to bring back with you a single skin if there are enough birds that one may be spared, and, if not, photographs. Now get along with you; and hurry!"

CHAPTER III

OFF FOR THE EVERGLADES

THE boys *did* hurry. They hastened back to the laboratory and, without loss of a moment, proceeded to return their South American collection to a series of moth-proof lockers and drawers from which it had been taken earlier in the day. Satisfied that the material would remain there untouched during their prolonged absence, they next gave attention to the more important subject on hand. The plumes from the custom-house still remained scattered over the long counter which acted as a desk. Picking up the partial skin of the Carolina parrakeet, Fred was about to shuffle all the rest into a pile when Paul held his hand.

“Hold on there, Skinny,” he said; “these feathers are n’t in the same position as when we left.”

"What's the matter with them?" demanded the other, in surprise.

"Don't you remember? the aigrets were in one pile, and now they're scattered all over the place. And the parrakeet wings were n't down there at the end of the counter; they were chucked right in front of your place. You tossed them there yourself when we were called away."

Fred studied the counter intently, striving to recall the exact arrangement of its contents as he had left them.

"I believe you're right, you old eagle-eye," he finally admitted. "The heron wings are scattered, too. Somebody has been snoopin' around, but I guess they did n't take anything. Probably one of the men from the other rooms. He came in to see how we were getting on, and, finding we were absent, looked things over a bit, just as you or I would do; that's the answer. We'll send in our report on the plumes and keep the parrakeet skin, turning back all the rest. The museum is allowed to hold out anything it wants, you know,

provided it is property that has been confiscated."

The wings of the parrakeet and their few adhering shreds of skin were placed in a drawer separate from the rest of the collection, and the remainder of the plumes were bundled up preparatory to being returned to the inspector who had brought them and who still remained in the building.

"Now, what's the dope on our trip?" inquired Paul in a businesslike voice when this duty was concluded. "To what part of Florida do we go, and how?"

"To the Everglades, I suppose," was the uncertain rejoinder, "though exactly where, I don't know. The thing to do is to pick out a place which we can use as a base, and then head out from there. As for getting to Florida, the train is the quickest route."

He walked across the room to a shelf on which were piled sheaves of various colored pamphlets. Selecting one with a blue cover, he returned to his chum. The booklet proved to be a folded map, and this he spread on the

counter in front of them. The two fell into an absorbing study of the geography of the State of Florida.

"There are the Glades," declared Fred, indicating a section of the map with his finger, "down at the southern extremity of the peninsula. Miami, over on the east coast, is almost on the center line. On the west coast there seem to be a number of rivers, mostly named after the men who discovered them, I suppose—Allen, Turner, Barnes, and a dozen others."

"Whew, here's a jaw-cracker for you!" ejaculated Paul. "Listen: the Fahkahratcheea River! You have to be taken with a bad cold before you can say it right."

"And here's another," grinned Fred, "Lake Okeechobee, up at the northern part of the Everglades. They're Indian names; Seminole, I guess, for that is the only tribe which inhabits that region."

"They must be an unhealthy lot," Fat muttered.

"How do you make that out?" curiously demanded his companion.

"From the names they give places," was the cool response. "They must pretty near sneeze to death every time they talk."

Fred chuckled and continued to study the map. "There don't seem to be many towns on the west coast," he presently observed.

"They're all concentrated along the Atlantic seaboard. Hold on a minute; here's one called Everglade over near the gulf coast and another just below it called Chokoloskee—"

He was interrupted by a grunt of disgust from Paul. Unheeding, he continued:

"There's another named Thrasher, and one called Survey."

"What was that last?" suddenly demanded the other lad.

"Survey."

"No, I mean the one before that."

"Thrasher? What do you want? Why, that's so!"

The man whom they had rescued from being ground beneath the wheels of the flying hook-and-ladder several weeks ago had come from that town.

"That's the place!" cried Fat, sitting back

in his chair and banging the counter with his fist. "Mr.—Mr.—what was his name?"

"Whitehouse?"

"Yes, that's it. He invited us to visit him and stay as long as we wanted, remember?"

"Of course I do! That's where we'll go, Fat. We'll telegraph him to-night, and ought to receive an answer by to-morrow or next day."

They fell to studying the map with increased ardor. Thrasher appeared to be situated toward the center of the peninsula not far from the Everglades proper and about twenty or thirty miles south of Lake Okeechobee, an ideal spot for their base. But the ranch had its drawbacks.

"There's no railroad within thirty miles of the place!" mournfully stated Paul, when he had in vain searched the map for the telltale crooked black line. "The Atlantic Coast Line runs only to Fort Myers, and there seems to be a branch running over toward that unpronounceable lake you tried to name a while ago; that's all. It stops before it gets there,

and it looks as if the rest of the journey had to be made on foot."

"There must be roads," suggested Fred, "and we can hire a wagon of some sort to cart our things. I vote we make a try at it."

"I suppose we'd better," grumbled the other, though with a good-natured gleam in his eye. "I always did hate walkin'; but, still, business is business. Think Mr. Whitehouse really meant it when he asked us to come?"

Fred nodded as if certain on that subject.

"But to make sure," he added, "we'll get a telegram off as soon as possible. In the mean time we might as well start getting our stuff together. Shot-guns are all the firearms we'll need for the trip. You go ahead and gather up what forceps and scalpels will be necessary, and all that sort of stuff while I slip down to the Penn Station to make reservations for to-morrow night. There's no need of waiting until Monday, do you think?"

"No, I should say not!" the other pronounced decidedly. "The sooner we're off the better. Dr. Keene gave us plenty of lee-

way in regard to that; but don't forget that we 'll have to await an answer to the telegram and it may not come for two days."

"That 's right," agreed Fred. "I 'd forgotten it. I 'll make a reservation for to-morrow and one for the day after, and we can cancel the one we don't need. And one more thing, Fat: you might see if the four-by-five camera is all right while I 'm gone. I 'll buy a gross of plates when I 'm down town and have 'em sent right up."

He turned to hurry from the room, but scarcely had he reached the door when he was startled by an excited whoop from Paul. He whirled, and in a second was back at his chum's side.

"What 's the matter, Fat?" he cried in a tone of amazement not unmingled with alarm. "What 's happened? Are you in pain?"

For a moment Fat was unable to answer. He merely stuttered and waved his hands inanely about. His round face was as red as a beet and his blue eyes flashed with excitement.

"What 's the matter?" again demanded

Fred, entirely at a loss at this sudden change in his chum.

"D-don't make t-the second r-reservation!" the latter finally managed to stutter. "We 're goin' to-morrow night!"

"What?" came from his puzzled companion.

"To-morrow night, I tell you!" roared Paul, who had now regained the full use of his lungs. "Don't wait for the answer to the telegram; we 're goin', anyway!"

"Are you crazy?"

"No, they 're there! They 're there, I say; and we 're goin'!"

"Of course they are, and of course we are going," soothed Fred. What a terrible calamity had happened. The mind of his chum had given away!

"You 'd better come down town with me, Fat," he continued kindly. "We 'll go home first and then to the station later."

At this Fat broke into a roar of laughter. "Do you really think I 've gone crazy, old Skinny Shanks?" he chuckled, slapping the

other on the back. "I 'm not, but don't you remember Mr. Whitehouse telling all about the things that inhabit the Everglades, all the alligators, the wildcats, the herons, and the *parrakeets*? Remember now?"

For answer Fred gave a shout which in comparison made Fat's first whoop sound like a feeble cap-pistol fired during a barrage of seventy-fives. As if hurled by a hidden spring, he jumped for the door. With a parting "I 'm on my *way*!" he slammed it behind him, and Paul heard his feet doing a hurried tattoo down the long corridor.

CHAPTER IV

AN UNPLEASANT GREETING

SEVENTY-TWO hours after the event just narrated the young collectors disembarked from their Pullman at Fort Myers. Only one incident had marred their journey, and that was soon forgotten in the pleasure obtained from watching the ever-changing panorama from the car window. South Carolina, with its vast stretches of impenetrable moss-hung cypress swamps, had been traversed; Georgia, with its flat, interminable miles of pines, had swept by; and finally the train had drawn into the city of Jacksonville, Florida.

As here there was a full hour to wait until the Flyer started for points farther south, the boys decided upon a walk to stretch their legs and freshen their muscles; but just as they were on the verge of leaving their seats, they

were surprised by a voice calling for Mr. Fred Milton. A small uniformed messenger-boy, black as a lump of tar, entered the car and, casting a sharp glance at its occupants, advanced down the aisle in their direction.

"Mistah Milton; telegram fo' Mistah Milton!"

"Guess that 's me," Fred muttered in aside to his companion, and, holding out his hand, called, "Here you are, boy!"

The messenger gave Fred a shrewd, piercing glance, and shook his head, showing a full set of ivory teeth in a grin which slit his small face completely across. "No, suh," he said, "this hyar is fo' Mistah Milton."

"I am Mr. Milton," Fred quietly answered.

"Sho', are yo', now? Why, yo' is only a boy. I 'm suah yo' is—"

"He 's Mr. Milton, all right," cut in Paul, hurriedly, for a titter could be heard coming from other occupants of the car. "Give him the telegram and wait to see if there is an answer."

The boy, with evident hesitation, handed

Fred the yellow envelope, and, shaking his head dubiously, stood to one side while the latter perused its contents. Having scanned the type-written words, Fred handed the telegram to Paul, who studied it with rising puzzlement stamped on his round, cherubic face. This is what he saw:

Did you take parrakeet skin with you? If not, where did you store it?

Paul read this aloud, and dropped the missive to stare at his chum. The telegram was signed by Dr. Keene.

"W-what does he mean?" he stammered.

"It's lost!" was the short response, and, without loss of words, requesting a blank from the young negro, Fred dashed off a message to the head of the museum in which he stated that the skin had been left in a certain locker in the laboratory. When the messenger-boy had betaken himself off, enriched by half a dollar, and grinning from ear to ear, the two stared at each other for a moment without further comment.

"How could it be lost when it's in that locker?" finally demanded Paul in a befuddled tone. "I put it there myself, and Dr. Keene knows where it is."

"That's just the point," gravely declared Fred. "Dr. Keene must have looked there and failed to find it. That's the reason for the telegram; he thinks that, at the last moment, we may have taken it with us. Somebody *else* has taken it, Fat!"

"But who could possibly know we had it?" the other persisted. "Dr. Keene is the only person outside ourselves who knows that such a fresh skin exists."

"Somebody examined the plumes while we were in Dr. Keene's office, don't you remember?"

"By Jove," exclaimed Fat, "that's so! Whoever looked those over is the person who has taken the parrakeet!"

"That must be it," agreed the other. "And, after all, I don't suppose ~~the~~ loss is so very serious."

"Not *serious*?" half shouted Paul. "Why, it may lose us five thousand dollars! That



"W-What does he mean?" he stammered

skin is almost fresh, and any unscrupulous person could easily palm it off as being collected by himself within the last month. Not serious? I call it a black catastrophe!"

There was no denying the truth of Paul's words. In improper hands, the possession of those wings might spell disaster to the expedition and the death-knell to their hopes for the reward.

"If the skin really has been stolen and later is submitted to the societies, our only hope remains in Dr. Keene," acknowledged Fred. "He knows about it, and, although he has n't seen it, he could at least hold up the awarding of the prize until we get back."

After a long and tedious trip from Jacksonville, they at length reached Fort Myers, where cars were changed, and they embarked on one of the small branch railroads in which Florida abounds. The thirty miles traversed in this proved the longest they had ever undertaken in a train.

It was by the merest chance that they caught the train at all that day in Fort Myers, there being no regular schedule on the line worthy

of mention. An engine and two passenger-coaches were supposed to leave the Fort at six o'clock each morning, but lack of steam, or a derailment farther along the line, or a burnt bridge, a fallen tree, or any one of a hundred other possibilities generally necessitated a delay; any train might be from two to twenty-four hours behind its schedule. Fortunately for the travelers, on the day in question, it was merely a hot-box incurred the previous evening which had inflicted some slight damage, and by noon the little "special" was ready to proceed.

When Fort Myers finally was left behind, the young collectors felt that the end of the journey was in sight. The country through which the "special" crawled at a fifteen-mile gait was flat, sandy, and covered for the most part with a straggling pine forest carpeted with pine-needles and low, bushy palmettos. It stretched for an interminable distance, farther than the eye could penetrate through the hot smoky haze, the sultry atmosphere of a Floridian spring. The dreary, uninviting sameness of it cooled the ardor of the travelers.

But there were breaks in the monotony. At rare intervals, which became more frequent as they advanced toward the interior, the track led over small creeks where verdure abounded in true tropical luxury, where gaunt, enormous cypress-trees, spangled and laced with streamers of silvery moss, reared tall crowns skyward above the smaller pines, and the bright green live-oaks interlocked over the narrow waters. Here taller palms of the cabbage variety rose above the ragged groups of stunted palmettos. Great ferns fringed the banks, and here and there a stately royal palm sent up its shaft-like trunk to rival the tallest cypress. On the whole, however, it was an uninviting region as viewed from a car window, barren pine-land and ridden with bleak, tree-filled swamps.

With scarcely a single exception the pines had been striped and gashed for pitch from which to manufacture turpentine. The trunks on opposite sides were torn free of bark for varying distances, the gashes sometimes reaching six feet or more from the ground. Driven into the yellow exposed

surface projected strips of tin to act as spouts to catch the sap and direct it into long narrow receptacles of burned clay which hung beneath. When these were filled their contents would be scooped out and transported to a central station set up in the midst of the forest. There, after the turpentine had been distilled off from a huge vatful, the residue would remain as resin.

During the course of the journey the train pulled by one of these distilling-stations, and the boys sighed when they saw the acre upon acre of barrels—thousands of them—lying on their sides filled with resin and awaiting transportation.

“If the people continue tapping the pines at that rate, there soon won’t be any trees left to tap,” Paul observed with conviction, and he was right. The State of Florida has been largely denuded of its forests by seekers for turpentine, and it is safe to say that fifty years more will see the last of the pines. The process of extracting the sap in present use is fatal to the tree, as sure death to it as if the tree were chopped off short with an ax; but it takes

longer. The larger, more sturdy specimens live for years under the unremitting strain on their systems, but in the end all succumb unless first converted into lumber. Little by little the lower branches rot off, then those higher up; and finally the top turns brown and dies. It has become a custom to lumber off the forest just before the trees begin to die, but millions of the trees are tapped when too young and are therefore worthless as timber. They shrivel and die before their more hardy companions are ready for the ax. Great open glades have thus formed in the once dense forest, which now at best is a thin, sparse, uneven growth. It is a waste, sheer unmitigated destruction, but the tapping will go on until the end is reached; for turpentine is a most necessary essential oil to civilization.

The train crept on through this devastated region until at last, at five o'clock, the travelers reached their destination. And what a fitting climax it was to such a journey! There was no town. The station consisted of a tumble-down open shed with a rusty corrugated iron roof which opened to the blue sky

in a dozen places. A large weather-beaten house stood a hundred yards away. It was built of clapboards innocent of the touch of a paint-brush, with a roof of tin, colored red. Running across in front was a large porch almost level with the ground, on which were scattered half a dozen chairs in a high state of ruin. A narrow road of white sand ran by both house and station, and, suddenly curving, became lost in the darkness of the pine forest. This was the settlement.

Not a soul occupied the station as the train faltered to a standstill. The boys stepped out carrying their hand luggage, and saw that their trunk had preceded them from the forlorn baggage-car. Scarcely had they set foot on the uneven mass of cinders which formed the station platform than the "special," in a cloud of steam from a leaky cylinder-head, an outburst of asthmatic wheezes, and the clatter of loosened brakes, rumbled off, and, like the village main street, became lost in the pine-land. The end of the railroad journey was indeed reached.

For a minute or two the travelers spoke not

a word, so awed were they by the dreary atmosphere of the place. No vehicle was in sight, no person, no sign of humanity save the ramshackle house in the background. They seemed as definitely cut off from civilization as if they had been at the head-waters of the Amazon. A satirical grin spread over Paul's rubicund countenance as he stared at the weather-beaten sign which hung from the eaves of the shed and on which he faintly discerned the printed name "Prosperity."

"Prosperity?" he chuckled, wryly. "Say, Skinny, what's in a name? If this is Prosperity, what must the city of Calamity be like?"

Fred smiled and agreed that the settlement did not have the appearance of a booming town; and then he dubiously inquired, glancing at the empty road and the uninviting house:

"What's next on the program?"

"Dunno," grinned Fat with unfailing spirits; "it looks as if we'd have to pitch camp right here and wait until some one comes along. Mr. Whitehouse telegraphed that

he'd meet us here, but I reckon he's lost track of the train. We might see if we can arouse somebody in that house."

They walked down the dusty road and mounted the rickety step that led to the equally rickety porch. The place appeared deserted, but, undaunted, the boys banged heavily on the door with their fists.

"Nobody's home, I guess," decided Fat, and they were about to leave the porch when, to their joy, the door slowly opened. A man stepped out and carefully closed it behind him.

"Good evening," said Fred. "We thought no one was at home."

The man said nothing, but stood looking them over slowly from head to foot, as if they had been a foreign species. He was tall and thin, and wholly unprepossessing. His clothes, a dirty white shirt and a pair of torn, baggy trowsers, were unfit to grace the body of a tramp. A battered straw hat sagged over one eye; his face was covered with a black, straggly, unkempt beard, which thoughtfully hid the ugly features beneath; and one

eye was missing—it was almost hidden by the hat. The other, watery green though it was, glittered with unconfined wickedness as it glared at the new-comers. In one hand he held a Winchester rifle.

“Er-er, good evening,” stuttered Fat, clearing his throat and throwing a doubtful glance at the weapon.

“What are yo’ all doin’ hyar?” growled the man in an uncompromising voice, throwing the rifle across his arm in a threatening attitude. “Who are yo’ and what do yo’ all want?”

The man’s good eye traveled beyond them and rapidly took in the station shed, the forest, and the road that wound beyond. Apparently satisfied at what he saw, he repeated his questions.

“We came on the train,” answered Fred, indicating their trunks and bags, which still reposed near the shed. “We expected some one to meet us, but as he is n’t here, we are looking for a place to spend the night. Can you put us up?”

The request was met with a snarl. “No,

suh! Yo' cyan't sleep in this hyar house. What's yo' names, and who are yo' lookin' fo'?"

"It's unnecessary to tell you that," Fred soberly retorted, though his cheeks reddened at the surliness of the man and his inhospitable reception of their request for a night's lodging. "If you can't put us up, that's all there is to it."

"No it ain't," rumbled the disagreeable creature—he could hardly be called a man—fixing the boys with his glittering eye. "What's yo' name, and what do yo' all want?"

"I told you—" began Fred, but was interrupted by his chum.

"We are expecting a friend of ours, Mr. Whitehouse, to meet us," he said shortly, and, turning, with a word to Fred, started to leave the porch.

An exclamation from the stranger caused them to face around. At the name of Whitehouse, his whole attitude had altered. Before, he had been calm enough, albeit surly, but now he seemed to radiate rage from his entire being. His lone eye fairly bored the

boys through and through; his whole body quivered; his hands shook; and he partly raised the rifle.

"A *friend* of yo's!" he half shouted. "Hyar yo', a friend of yo's! I 'd kill any—"

"Jest drap that rifle, and let's talk it over a bit!" a voice interrupted from the far side of the veranda. "Drap it, I say, and be quick about it!"

A man stepped out from the cover of the side of the house and advanced toward the trio on the porch with a pistol in his hand, which he kept aimed at the owner of the rifle. The rifle clattered to the floor, and, with an oath, the man with the frowzy beard stepped back a pace. The new-comer strode up to him, placed his foot on the rifle, and, still watching his enemy, spoke to the boys.

"Are yuh all Fred Milton and Paul Jenkins? Mr. Whitehouse is expectin' yuh, an' sent me down to collect yuh. He was perverted from comin' hisself account o' hurtin' his arm. I 'm his head man, Jeff Down, an' I 'll lead yuh along jest as soon as I fix this hyar diamond-back.

“Can either of yuh drive a flivver? Yuh can? That’s fine! She’s down the road a piece. Go fetch her and get yo’ stuff aboard, an’ then meet me hyar.”

CHAPTER V

JEFF DOWN

DUMFOUNDED, the boys left the porch and hastened down the road in the direction indicated by Jeff Down. They caught a fleeting glimpse of the one-eyed ruffian backed against the door, with their new friend standing before him waving his pistol and talking; then a corner of the house shut out the sight.

"He's what I call a bad customer!" exclaimed Paul, breathing a sigh of relief when they were safely away. "What do you suppose got into him? We certainly weren't lookin' for trouble, and there he comes pointin' his rifle at us and acting as if he was about to murder us. Yes, sir, he's a desperate character!"

"He looked it," agreed Fred, with a nod. "I thought he really was going to shoot when that chap Down appeared. If the country's

full of ruffians like him, Fat, it looks as if we might have an exciting time of it here. And all for no reason, so far as I could see."

"And did n't Jeff Down handle him most *beautifully*, Skinny?" chuckled the other, fast recovering his spirits. "The one-eyed chap just wilted right down; and so would I if some one pointed a pistol at me in that manner. I hope he does n't break loose from Jeff until we get our things loaded into the car."

They discovered the small Ford truck half-hidden in a thicket of low palmettos around a turn in the narrow road, and in a few seconds, with Fred at the wheel, were plowing through the sand past the house toward the shed. As they swung by the porch they beheld Down and his victim in the same attitude as ten minutes before. The little car chugged and spluttered down to the shed and in five minutes was back, fuming and rattling, in front of the house.

"All ready, Mr. Down," shouted Fred, throttling down the engine. "What's the next thing to do?"

For answer, Down picked up the fallen rifle

and, with his pistol, motioned the disgruntled ruffian out into the road beside the car.

"Going to take him along?" Paul asked.

"No, suh! We ain't goin' to dirty the cyar up with no sech vermin as him. He 'll stay right hyar."

With these words Down climbed into the truck, carrying the newly acquired rifle with him. He was clad in faded khaki riding-breeches and a blue flannel shirt which served to reveal the lithe muscling of the body beneath. He was thin and tall, six foot one in his stockings, and must have tipped the scales at 175 pounds. Not an ounce of superfluous flesh was wasted on his supple body. His face was tanned to the shade of cordovan by long exposure to the weather, and his gray eyes, stern in time of need, held an habitual humorous glint. He was a superior type of Floridian "cracker."

Jeff took the steering-wheel. His enemy stood glaring after him as, with a more determined stutter than ever, the yellow jitney-bus jerked forward. As it swept around the dilapidated house the boys looked back in time

to see the ruffian raise a fist and impotently shake it in their direction. Then he was lost in a cloud of dust.

"Who was he?" demanded Fred, after they had proceeded a short distance in silence.

"A leetle bit of low-down trash," was the answer.

"What 's his name?"

"Dan Boulton."

"Why was he so rough on us?"

"I reckon yuh must have told him that yuh was friendly with Mr. Whitehouse, did n't yuh now?"

The boys nodded vigorously. "Of course we did," declared Paul. "He seemed so suspicious, and I thought the mention of Mr. Whitehouse would smooth things over a bit."

Jeff Down broke into a roar of laughter. "Yeow," he chuckled, "so yuh thought it would smooth things, did yuh? Sort o' reacted different, did n't he, than yuh thought he would?"

Fat ruefully acknowledged that this had been the case, and Jeff Down renewed his

mirth. Presently, when able to articulate with some degree of freedom, he said:

“Of course he did. Him and Mr. Whitehouse are about as friendly as a hen and a wildcat. Yuh see, it’s this way: The Thrasher ranch comprises about fifty thousand acres, which is quite a bit o’ land, yuh ’ll admit—runs from about five miles below hyar clear down into the Everglades. As yuh can see from the country around hyar—his is mostly like this, all pine forest, cypress swamp, hammocks, and palmettos—it ain’t exactly what yuh ’d call overburdened with verdure for cattle grazin’. Howsomever, his bulls an’ steers manage to git along without starvin’.

“But when other men turn thar cattle loose in the territory it makes the feed come scarcer than ever, so thar ’s nothin’ to do but keep the other cattle off. The land belongs to Mr. Whitehouse, so what does he do but run a wire fence around it. That alone is quite some job, thar bein’ more ’n a hundred mile of it, but no sooner do we git it done than other cattle men begin cuttin’ it to let thar cattle

through. Mr. Whitehouse is an easy-goin' sort o' man, an' fo' a while he don't do nothin' but patch up the fence where it's cut.

"Things go along in that way fo' near on a year, an' the old man begins to git peeved. Then one day I find a stretch of five mile wiped out, stakes an' wire clean swept away an' buried somewhere. Well, say, that jest about finishes Mr. Whitehouse's good temper. Right then an' thar he declares war on the wire-cutters. And let me tell yuh, when he gits riled up, thar ain't no stoppin' him. As a result, thar's been a leetle blood-lettin' on both sides, an' the wire-cutters are gittin' scarce around hyar. Fo' the last six months they've found this bit o' country mighty unhealthy, a leetle mo' than they could stand."

Intensely interested, Fred inquired, "Why did n't Mr. Whitehouse appeal for protection from the State or county?"

Jeff spat over the running-board of the car and chuckled dryly. "Thar ain't no pertection in this hyar State," he declared.

"Surely you can have the lawbreakers arrested and tried."

But Jeff shook his head. "No, suh, that's jest what yuh cyan't. Speak about yo' rotten politics in other States, well, jest let me tell yuh that alongside the State o' Florida the other States are jest like Sunday-school to a gamblin'-den. Thar ain't no sech thing as straight politics hyar. Thar may be a few honest men in the government who ain't crooked, but they mostly keep away from these hyar parts. No, suh, and thar ain't no sech thing as a square deal in the county courts either. Yuh cayn't find a jury that'll convict a wire-cutter. Cause why? Half of 'em are wire-cutters themselves. The sheriff, he ain't goin' to arrest no one, cause if he does, that man's brother or uncle or cousin'll git him later, jest as sure as shootin'; an' that's the way it generally ends. No, suh, Mr. Whitehouse tried the courts, but didn't git no satisfaction that-a-way."

"I suppose Boulton is a wire-cutter?" inquired Fred. "Is that what makes him so bitter toward Mr. Whitehouse?"

"It sho' is. Dan Boulton is, or uster be, a big cattle owner about hyar. When the old

man took up the Thrasher, he bought him out an' Dan left the country. Bimeby he came back dead broke, and that 's the time the worst wire-cuttin' commenced. We had a leetle scrimmage along the line one night last fall, an' Dan, he lost an eye, as yuh may have noticed. He holds it up against the old man fo' that, and has sworn to shoot him on sight. That 's all thar is to that."

"But don't they hang a man down here for killing people?" amazedly demanded Paul.

"Sho', no!" shrugged the man; "only niggers when they attack white folk. They might say something if it war done in the big towns, but out hyar in the country, no, suh. Did n't I tell yuh the sheriff ain't goin' to arrest no one who 's got relatives who says he sha'n't? Yuh 've got to take the law into yo' own hands hyar."

"Well, that beats me!" murmured Paul. "Do you mean to say that you could have shot Boulton and no one would have said anything about it?"

"Course I could, in self-defense, but I don't like shootin' unless I *have* to do it. If we 'd

known he war goin' to be in Prosperity, we 'd 'a' telegraphed yuh to git off the station befo'. None of us are lookin' fo' trouble."

At the close of this amazing discourse the boys rode for several miles without speech. Here, indeed, was food for thought. What kind of an uncivilized region was this? Even in the interior of the vast Amazonian wilderness there had been a greater semblance of law and order; there, at least, one savage Indian respected the rights of another; whereas here, in the civilized State of Florida, in their own United States, the reverse appeared to be true. And they had the evidence of their own eyes to prove it.

Five miles from Prosperity, Down stopped the car at a gate that swung across the mouth of a side road, and dismounted. Flinging it open, he motioned Fred to drive through, and then, as it clanged to, he again mounted beside them. They had entered the outposts of the Thrasher ranch.

The pine forest continued here, and the trees were larger than those noticed from the train windows. Thus far they had been left

unmarred by turpentine hunters. Apparently the forest had been overlooked by the ax of the lumberman and grew in all virgin luxuriance. And scattered, feeding in twos and threes on the coarse verdure that littered the forest floor, were numerous small, lean cattle.

It was spring of the year, and, though the northern migration was well under way, the trees were still full of birds. Robins flew about in scores; great pileated woodpeckers called hoarsely from the tree-tops; flickers courted on the lower limbs; and the car flushed a covey of quail for every quarter of a mile progressed. Once it startled a rabbit, which darted across the road and became lost in a clump of palmettos. And again it passed a slough where stood a tall dignified Ward's heron fishing alone in solitary grandeur.

The miles sped by. A long black-snake wriggled almost from beneath the wheels. The light vehicle bounced from side to side, now plunging through white sand which rose almost to the hubs, now tearing over a road hidden by growths of palmetto and a coarse sedge. The character of the country altered.

The pine forest became broken by great stretches of cypress swamp, where the gaunt trunks and branches were festooned with pale-green, needle-like leaves and long straggling tufts of Spanish moss. These morasses in turn gave way to open glades a-sparkle with pink and white flowers, and a species of sedge that grew in luxurious abundance. They passed a pond nestling in the center of a glade a mile in diameter, from which rose a score of little herons, colored both white and blue. A large, long-necked bird, as big as a duck, and as awkward, half fell from a dead tree-top and then soared around the glade, rising higher and higher with each revolution, until it looked not larger than a sparrow high up in the sky.

Fred nudged his chum and pointed to this disappearing object. "Recognize that, Fat?" he asked.

"Looks like a snake-bird," nodded the other, "an anhinga or water-turkey. I wonder if it's the same species as the one found in Demerara? There, look at him, he's comin' down!"

The anhinga circled lower just as it had gone up, fluttering, then soaring, and fluttering again. Each revolution carried it closer to the ground until, with a frantic beating of wings, it alighted on the same tree vacated a few minutes before.

"This country looks good to me," declared Fat in a voice ringing with enthusiasm. "It's ideal for all kinds of birds and animals. The forest is alive with birds, and these open glade-swamps seem literally crawling with life. It certainly looks better than it did from the train!" Then, bethinking himself of their errand, he asked:

"Do you ever see any parrakeets here, Mr. Down?"

"No, suh, not nowadays. I ain't seen one fo' near on a year now, though thar uster be thousands of 'em. And you'd better call me Jeff. I ain't got no mister to my name, to my friends."

"All right, Jeff," grinned the boy, "I don't like the mister business either. But I'm sorry to hear you say that there are n't any

parrakeets left. Those are what we came down here to find."

"Well, thar may be, Mr. Jenkins—"

"Steady on there, Jeff," the boy interrupted; "my name is Paul, and my friends call me Fat, and this long-legged chap by my side is commonly known as Skinny. There's no mister to our names either."

"Very well, Fat, I was goin' to say thar may be some left a few mile further south in the Everglades proper. If they've only quit comin' hyar fo' a year, thar must be some left down thar, don't yuh think?"

"I hope so," heartily agreed the boys, "because we sure do want to see one alive."

CHAPTER VI

THE THRASHER

“**H**OW far is it now to the ranch-house?” Fred presently inquired. “Only about a mile,” Jeff replied. “Hyar comes Mr. Whitehouse, a-ridin’ horse-back.”

The ranch owner was delighted to see the boys and offered his apologies for not meeting them in person at the train. He was mounted on a big bay horse, which pranced nervously at the sight of the automobile, but, although the left arm of the rider hung in a sling, he seemed to have little difficulty in controlling the beast with his good right hand. Urging his steed forward, he reined up beside the car, which had drawn to a standstill.

“Well, Mistah Milton and Mistah Jenkins,” he greeted the boys with a smile of welcome, “so you really meant it when you tele-

graphed you were coming. I *am* glad to see you. You are most welcome to Thrasher."

"Thank you, Mr. Whitehouse," replied Fred, who with his chum had climbed to the ground. "We have been looking forward to the visit and are more than glad to get here." Then, with a look of concern at his host, he added: "I 'm sorry, sir, to see that you 've hurt your arm. I hope it 's not bad?"

"Pooh, suh, it 's nothing at all, suh. I met with a slight accident about a week ago; nothing worth mention. Did you have a pleasant trip?"

"Quite entertaining, at any rate," smiled the boy. "We had an exciting experience at the station, and met an acquaintance of yours, a certain Dan Boulton."

The face of the old gentleman hardened at sound of the name, and his eyes took on an unwonted, stony glint that had hitherto been absent. An expression of concern crossed his features.

"I hope you had no trouble," he said, quietly.

"None at all, thanks to Jeff here. The man

did sort of take us by surprise, though," and Fred narrated their adventure.

"He is a bad one," declared Mr. Whitehouse when the tale was concluded. "He is a man whom it is best either to shoot or avoid entirely. But he won't bother you any in this neighborhood; you may rest assured of that. You had better drive on to the house now, and I will trot after."

It was well-nigh dusk when the truck drew up before a long, low rambling structure set in an open glade in the forest. Surrounding it, and placed deeper among the trees were a dozen smaller houses, quarters of the ranch-hands. A great barn, half hidden by the pines, stood a quarter of a mile back.

The main house, the home of Mr. Whitehouse, was a one-story shingled bungalow. From time to time he evidently had added to it until now its numerous wings, its low gables, and screened porches gave it a great, comfortable, home-like appearance. The grounds, large and grassy, were dotted with orange-trees hung with bright golden fruit. Vines of Virginia creeper, wistaria, and vivid orange-

blooming bignonia covered the porches and climbed to the shingled roof. On the lawn, scattered among the oranges, were small groups of cabbage palmettos, and, running from the rear of the house to inclose the servants' quarters, was a tall hedge of kumquats heavily laden with small oval fruit.

Nor were the new arrivals disappointed with the interior of the house. It was all that the outside view promised it to be. The rooms were large, well lighted by numerous windows, airy. The furnishings were rich, but not gaudy, and gave evidence of the good taste of their owner. As Paul expressed it, there was sufficient room to breathe in that house, yet it was all comfortable and cozy.

The lads were shown to their room by an aged darky who occupied the place of confidential servant to Mr. Whitehouse. His hair, snow-white as his master's, still retained its negro crinkle; his coal-black face, deep-seamed by time, was kind in expression, and his dark eyes sparkled with the same hospitable light already discovered by the visitors in the eyes of their host.

"Marse Robert tole me put yo' in dat dar room," the negro chuckled, pointing to a door opposite the one to which they had been led, "but Ah say dat no git de wes' breeze, so Uncle Billy put yo' in hyar. Yo' chiles like big room with plenty coolness, Uncle Billy know, hee-hee, so hyar yo' is. If yo' whant anyt'ing jest yo' call yo' Uncle Billy."

With that the kind-hearted black left the room and the boys to their own devices. Five minutes later he reëntered with their bags and directed two small, half-grown darkies to deposit their trunk in the corner.

"Hab a care how yo' handle dat dar wardrobe, yo' little debbils," he cautioned severely, as one of the boys made as if to drop his end. "Hyar yo', ain't yo' no strenf? Is yo' growin' so weak dat yo' cayn't lift a straw, yo' good-fo'-nothin' nigger? Yo' be careful dar! Doan't yo' know dat's dese gen'lemen's propriety? If yo' should drap dat, it would cost yo' a billion dollars. . . . Come on, come on, does yo' whant yo' Uncle Billy t' do it? Dar, dat's better; now git out o' hyar, yo' inauspicious

pickaninnies; git befo' Ah fo'git mas'lf an' lambaste yo' with mah cane."

As, grinning from ear to ear, the two chore-boys withdrew, Uncle Billy turned to Fred and Paul with an apologetic laugh. "Ah's sorry, suhs, to hab to introduct dose indecent niggers into yo' presence, but it became a necessary on account o' dat dar trunk. Yo' ole Uncle Billy ain't quite so spry as he uster been."

"We'll try to forgive you this time, Uncle Billy," smiled Paul. "I must say that, for all your years, you don't seem to be much of a cripple," indicating the two large satchels which Uncle Billy had himself carried in. "Have you charge of the whole house?"

"Yes, suh; yes, suh! Ah take command o' de whole caboodle. Marse Robert could n't git along without Uncle Billy, suh. Ah's head man, Ah is; Ah makes all de niggers toe de rope, Ah does. Ah makes 'em all persevere, an' dey know it."

"You must be an invaluable person to Mr. Whitehouse," agreed Fred, trying to keep his

face straight and succeeding after a fashion.

"Ah is a most voluble persun, suh," nodded the darky, highly pleased. "When dat pore, low-down white trash, Dan Boulton, shoot Marse Robert, Ah nuss him through until he git better. Yes, suh, Ah 's—"

"So Boulton shot Mr. Whitehouse, did he?" interposed Paul. "When did that happen, Uncle Billy?"

"Last week, suh, in de arm. It ain't quite better yet. Uncle Billy, he—"

"How did it happen?"

"Dat good-f'-nothin' Dan Boulton git cuttin' too much wire around hyar an' git druv away last year. At dat time he git hurt and swar dat he guine git Marse Robert. Well, he git him last week from behint a bunch of palmettos 'bout five mile from hyar. He ain't hit Marse Robert hard, but just enough t' make him mad. Dan Boulton git away though Marse try hard to stop um."

"I should think they would throw Boulton into prison for that."

"Prisum, suh? Dar ain't no jail hyar. Marse Robert, he doan't—"

"Hyar, Uncle Billy," sternly interrupted the voice of their host, as Mr. Whitehouse entered the room, "hyar, you black ace of spades, are you talking again? Get out of hyar and leave my guests in peace."

Rolling his eyes in pretended terror, nevertheless with a grin which slit his face asunder, Uncle Billy withdrew. He had known his "Marse Robert" from childhood, and ages ago, nearly sixty years, he had learned that his master's bark was far more severe than his bite.

"You must n't believe one tenth what that boy, Uncle Billy, says," Mr. Whitehouse informed his young guests with twinkling eyes, leading the way into his library. "If he can find some one to listen to him, he will talk for hours—worse than a phonograph."

"Now, my lads," he informed them with true Floridian hospitality when they were seated, "I desire to inform you that this house and all it contains, together with the entire

ranch, are yo's to command. I am deeply interested in yo' search and when you tell me more exactly what you are after, I will do what I can to aid you."

"We deeply appreciate your kindness, Mr. Whitehouse," quietly replied Fred, as formal as their host, "and we accept your hospitality with pleasure. The object of our expedition to the Everglades is to find a living Carolina parrakeet," and he launched forth into the story of the reward, the scarcity of the bird, and the probable failure of their expedition, not forgetting to mention the loss of the skin from the museum in New York. Mr. Whitehouse listened attentively, gravely nodding from time to time.

"We will talk further on the subject after dinner, if you young gentlemen don't mind," he presently said, and, rising, led the way to the spacious dining-room.

At the close of a most sumptuous meal, over which hovered Uncle Billy, clad in a dark cutaway coat with scarlet waistcoat and highly polished brass buttons, they pushed back their chairs, and their host lighted a cigar.

During the meal they had talked on every other subject under the sun but the parrakeets. The boys in turn had entertained their host with tales of adventure in South America, and the latter had narrated several anecdotes of the ranch and the country in which they now found themselves. Having finished their coffee, they sat silent for a few moments.

"I distinctly remembah noticing a pair of parrakeets almost exactly a year ago," Mr. Whitehouse presently remarked. Then, seeing the interest lighting the eyes of his guests, he continued: "My head man, Jeff Down, pointed them out on the top of a cypress at the edge of a swamp some twenty miles from hyar. I remembah we were quite excited over it, fo' they have become scarce of late years and it seemed like a sign that they were coming back again."

"Have you seen any since?" eagerly questioned Paul.

"No, suh, those were the last, I 'm sorry to say, but I 'm morally certain that a few may still be found a few miles south of hyar in the Glades. I suppose you 're anxious to start

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right out after them?" he inquired with a smile.

"Yes, sir; that is, no, sir," stammered Fred. "We would very much like to see your ranch first."

"All in good time, gentlemen," replied the host, still smiling. "That can rest until you return from yo' trip. I know you are dying to start right out in the morning."

"Oh, no, sir, we 'd—"

"Come now," Whitehouse chuckled, "own up. You would not enjoy yourselves fo' one second hyar unless you first had a try fo' the birds. Come, own up!"

"Well, you see, sir—"

"I knew it!" The old gentleman slapped his knee with his unwounded hand. "If you were not so eager to win that race I would n't feel like helping you so much. From what you tell me, you *are* running a kind of race with other parties, who may also be looking for the birds. Is n't that so?"

The boys nodded.

"Well," continued their host, "go in and win it. And that reminds me: Word came

this morning from one of my southern boundary men that a queer bug-hunter, as he termed him, had been inquiring about parrots. That means you had better get busy right soon."

"It most certainly does!" Fred declared in an alarmed tone. "We've got to get on the job right away, if that's the case."

"Yes, suh, it is, and I would advise starting out first thing in the morning; not that I want to drive you away from hyar," he added with a quiet laugh, "but I want to see you win the race. Jeff will accompany you to the Glades, and I reckon you can do the rest yo'selves."

"Thank you, sir," murmured the boys gratefully.

"You can have the little Ford jitney for yo' tent and luggage," Mr. Whitehouse continued. "I will telephone to all my outpost houses to give you help if you should call fo' it. Provisions, weapons if you need them, and a collapsible canoe will be waiting in the truck in the morning. I am backing you to win, and you've got to do it."

"We'll do our best," was the firm response. "At what time in the morning?"

"At daylight, suhs. Jeff Down will drive you to the spot where we saw the birds last year, which is within my boundaries, and he will remain there with you to establish a camp. He must leave the following morning, and you can arrange when he is to call for you."

Worn out from their recent journey, the boys retired early, but before daylight fully broke the next morning they had finished breakfast and stood in front of the bungalow ready for departure. The sun had just appeared above the tops of the tall pines when Jeff drove up with the car.

"All aboard fo' the Glades!" he shouted cheerily, making the motor hum and bringing the car to a sudden stop in front of them. "Git them things aboard, Uncle Billy, and be quick about it, yuh black rascal."

The boys shook hands with Mr. Whitehouse and climbed into the vehicle. They were clothed now in khaki, with leather puttees and flannel shirts. Both were armed with shot-guns. Their trunk remained behind in the bungalow, and their bags alone were placed in the automobile. They had

stripped down to the barest necessities for field service.

"Let her go, Jeff," said Fred.

"Good-by and good luck!" called the old gentleman, waving his hand as they sped down the sandy road; and at last the hunt for the Carolina parrakeets was actually under way.

CHAPTER VII

THE CAMP

“**W**HERE are we headed for now?” Paul asked Jeff, when the houses were hidden by the trees.

“Anywhar yuh say,” was the good-natured response. “Yuh are the bosses. I should say we travel south fo’ about twenty mile until we git within the Glades, and then simply git out an’ hunt.”

“That ’s the idea,” the boys enthusiastically agreed. “But can we get there in the car?”

“Surest thing yuh know. This hyar car will go anywhar a horse will. It don’t mind a bit o’ underbrush more ’n a steer. We ’ll jest plow along until we hit the swampy region.”

“How about horses?” ventured Paul. “Don’t you think we ’ll need some?”

“Ef yuh want them yuh can have them, but

I reckon this hyar car an' the canoe will be all the transportation yuh 'll need."

"Well, lead on, Jeff; we 're in your hands."

The forest, as a continuous belt of pines, suddenly melted when they had proceeded two miles from the bungalow. The road, a mere wagon-track through the wilderness, wound between long stretches of open marsh. Green islands of low trees rose from these, surmounted here and there by a tall cypress or the tufted head of a cabbage-palm. The meadows were dotted with cattle, knee-deep in the water, browsing blissfully on the rank grass that grew there.

After six miles of open country they drew into a second pine forest. Here the land was higher and the trees had firmer root. Ten miles more again found them in the open, with the trail six inches under water, and well nigh obliterated by matted sedge, but with a hard sandy bottom. Unmindful of these obstructions, Jeff drove the car forward, bumping over ruts and sloshing through water-holes as if they did not exist.

Presently, to the unaccustomed eyes of the

boys, the trail entirely disappeared, but still the engine chugged on. They plunged through the center of a half-mile of open lake; so, it seemed, and momentarily the travelers expected to be engulfed in some hidden sink-hole. But Down knew what he was doing, and, to their great relief, landed them safe on the other side, on one of the green islands that dotted the expanse.

"Whew, Jeff," murmured Paul, drawing a sigh of relief, when at length he saw dry land about them, "that was *some* trip! Were n't you afraid of being mired?"

"No, suh," laughed the man, "I 've traveled this hyar road befo'. This island is whar Mr. Whitehouse and I last saw them parrakeets, an' hyar is whar yuh ought to make yo' camp."

Much rejoiced that the precarious journey was over, the boys agreed that the island was an ideal place. Terrifying visions of more shallow lakes to ford in the car left them, and they breathed deep satisfaction at their deliverance. Such motoring had never before come within their experience.

Without more ado they dismounted. So

great was their eagerness to begin the hunt that, without wasting a thought on the establishment of a camp, they picked up their shot-guns and prepared to explore the region. Camp could wait, but the parrakeets could not.

“Hyar, yuh young fellers, yuh seem to be in a powerful mint o’ hurry,” their guide demurred good-naturedly. “How about fixin’ up the tent? Hyar, hold on, yuh ’d better wait fo’ me. This hyar country ain’t quite so safe as it looks. Thar’s plenty o’ sink-holes around that yuh might fall into, and ef yuh should happen to git mixed in yo’ direction, it would be right hard to find yo’ way back to this hyar island, they mostly look so alike. Ef yuh ’re so sot on goin’ right now, yuh ’d better let me steer yuh around a bit until yuh git used to it.”

“I guess you ’re right, Jeff, about arranging camp first,” Fred was compelled to acknowledge, controlling for the moment his ardor as a collector. “Suppose we do that, and then you can steer us around. We don’t want to get lost the first day out. Fat and I have had

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some little experience in traveling through the wilderness, but it was in a different type of country from this."

"That so?" answered Jeff, much interested.

The boys told him about their journey in South America, and thereafter he treated them with increased respect.

"That relieves me a whole lot," he observed. "I war afraid yuh was kind o' green at the game, but neow I reckon yuh all can take care o' yo'selves. Still, I reckon for a while it would be safer to stick together."

They selected a camp-site under a huge spreading live-oak. The tree, though scarcely fifty feet in height, shaded an expanse fully twice that far across, and the branches drooped to within ten feet of the ground. The soil beneath was as bare as if scraped with a knife.

Just beyond the tree the land sloped steeply down into a deep slough choked with broad-leaved water-lilies which grew from the water, not upon it, and were sprinkled with yellow, waxy blossoms. In the center of the slough, a hundred feet from shore, stood a

small grassy island of long, needle-like pickerel-weed mingled with arrow-heads and other water-plants. Beyond was a mass of small, tree-clad islands similar to the one on which they stood, but of lesser magnitude.

"It looks like a great resort for alligators," remarked Paul, taking in the tropical scene before him. "I suppose there are plenty around here, Jeff?"

"Yes, suh, thar are hundreds of 'em. Thar 's one neow, a small one, stickin' his snout up on to the bank hyar." He pointed to a seeming log that drifted in the water scarcely twenty feet from them. The saurian must have heard Jeff's words, for it opened a pair of evil yellow eyes, blinked, and, with a snort and a swirl, disappeared beneath the surface.

"Yes, suh, thar 's plenty of 'em around," continued the man, "But they don't touch no one who don't bother them. Leastways, I never hear o' any one gittin' hurt by 'em except when they 've got powerful riled up."

"Plenty of game, too," stated Paul, indicating some tracks in the soft ground near the water. "Deer, Jeff?"

"Loads of 'em."

"And wild turkeys," added Fred, picking up a large feather.

"Yes, suh, they 're common. It's breedin'-time fo' them neow."

"But where are the parrakeets?" asked Paul.

"Yuh 'll have ter hunt *them*," was the smiling retort. "Now, what do yuh say to pitchin' the tent befo' we do anything else, an' gittin' things fixed up shipshape?"

"How about some grub first?" hopefully inquired Fat, rubbing his stomach, in which there was an aching, hollow void. "Here it is nearly three o'clock and we haven't had a mouthful."

"I reckon yuh 're right," agreed the man in an apologetic tone. "I'd clean forgotten that."

They made a hasty meal from sandwiches the thoughtful Uncle Billy had put up, and then fell to work on the tent. In a very short time this had been erected, and sufficient wood to last for the night was collected. The tent being too small to hold them, together with all

the paraphernalia, a low shed was hastily constructed, roofed with palm-fronds, which would shelter the less perishable instruments. The camera and plates, however, were placed under canvas.

When the camp was set up to their satisfaction, Jeff motioned toward the canoe, which had been unloaded from the car and lay on the ground.

"Yuh 'll need this hyar contraption," he declared, "so I reckon we 'd better unfold it an' put it together."

The canoe was built of canvas, being held in shape by a collapsible framework that could be folded up like a camp-stool. When stretched out and fit for service, it was about sixteen feet long by three in breadth, and quite seaworthy, though not exactly graceful in appearance. Jeff dragged the little vessel down to the edge of the slough and turned to his companions.

"I perpose we visit some o' the other islands in this hyar neighborhood," he said, "jest to git acquainted. Thar's nigh two hour to sundown, so I reckon thar 'll be plenty o' time.

Come on, climb in. Yuh say the parrakeets ain't been seen fo' fifteen year or mo', but I seen 'em last year, and they ought to be stickin' around still. I 'm goin' ter show 'em to yuh."

They embarked in the frail craft, and Jeff guided them skilfully through the lily-choked slough. The pace was slow, because of the dense growth of the water-plants that they had to penetrate, and at times it became necessary to use the pole that Jeff had cut.

Twice alligators were seen, which plunged away at their approach, and once in an open pool a huge fish splashed them with its spray as it leaped from the water.

"What do you call that, Jeff?" inquired Fat, who was interested in fish of all kinds, wiping the drops from his eyes.

"That 's nothin' but one o' those hyar bass," was the careless answer.

"Bass? What kind do you mean?"

"Huh? I don't know, it 's jest a bass."

"Large-mouth," interjected Fred.

"Is that so?" cried his chum in a tone of disbelief. "Large-mouth bass in Florida? No bass that I ever saw grew as big as that!"

"He warn't a big one," vouchsafed Jeff indifferently.

"Not a big one? Why, he must have weighed seven or eight pounds!"

"I expect he did," retorted the man, "but that ain't nothin' fo' these hyar waters. I done speared one over twenty pounds, an' I heard o' one that weighed more 'n twenty-five."

"Good Lord," muttered Paul in amazement, "and up north we think six pounds is a whale of a bass! I'm goin' fishin' in a little while!"

CHAPTER VIII

THE HERON MEADOW

THE canoe drew up to the nearest wooded island, and its occupants prepared to disembark. This island was identical with others they could see, small and covered with a dense mass of brush matted together with interwoven vines. The only tree of normal size was a royal palm, which reared its fronded crown sixty feet above the rest.

"Watch whar yuh walk," cautioned their guide. "Thar 's plenty o' snakes around hyar, so be careful yuh don't tread on a cottonmouth or a diamond-back. They 're liable to treat yuh kinda rough."

"Snakes?" exclaimed Fat, drawing back into the canoe with a shiver. "Are there many here, Jeff? I hate 'em!"

"Jest watch whar yuh 're goin', an' they 'll git out o' yo' way. Wow, look out!"

It was not a snake that was about to lunge

at an occupant of the canoe, but merely Fat who was on the verge of taking an unlooked-for plunge into the slough. As Fred and the guide stepped from the frail craft, Paul, in the stern where he had remained, saw the bow pop into the air. His great weight had driven the rear end down, causing the vessel to assume an angle of forty-five degrees, with him at the lowest point.

"Grab the bow!" he gasped, making frantic efforts with his paddle to maintain his equilibrium.

"Haw-haw-haw!" bellowed Skinny, doubling up, and making no move to rescue his desperate chum.

"Hyar yuh are," said Jeff, chuckling aloud, but nevertheless seizing the unruly bow. "Step ashore neow. By the Lord Harry, yo' extra size almost told agin yuh that time!"

Fat climbed shakily to the bank and vouchsafed not a glance at his laughing chum. There was nothing funny about the incident that he could see.

"Thank you, Jeff," he said in a cool tone. "Now, when that gobbling turkey over there

gets through his noise, we can explore this island."

The guide led the way through the tangle of brush to the far side of the island. The boys saw nothing that resembled a parrot, though they startled from the bushes dozens of red cardinal-birds and scores of finches.

"This does n't look like much of a place for them," Paul declared, when they had reached the other side. "As I remember parrakeets in South America, they generally were found either in low fruit-trees or in the tops of great forest giants. That royal palm is the only thing that can be dignified as a tree; all the rest are bushes; so I vote we try that piece of forest over there."

He pointed to a large tract of rising land fringed with palms, which lay several hundred yards off to the southward and appeared to be mainly composed of live-oaks or trees of similar leafy character. Intervening, however, was a flat, seemingly dry meadow covered with tall grass. An inspection of this open space caused him to catch his breath.

"Look at those herons, Skinny!" he gasped,

forgetting in his excitement his estrangement from his chum. "Just look at 'em, will you! Did you ever see the likes of that?"

The exclamations were not without reason. Over an area of several acres the ground was literally covered with birds. Tall ones, little ones, blue, white and parti-colored they were as thick on the meadow as the grains on an ear of corn. They paid not the slightest attention to the spectators but continued to feed, quarrel, and court as if there had not been a human being within miles. The trio watched entranced.

"Six — seven — eight — nine!" enthusiastically counted Fred. "There are nine kinds there, Fat! Jove, what a bird paradise this is! If it was n't for the parrakeets, I'd be willing to stay here a year. Just look at 'em, will you! The little and big white egrets, the Ward's herons, the little blues and greens —and the great white heron! And there's the Louisiana, the one that looks like the little blue heron, only larger and more graceful! And there's—"

"There's three quawks flying over there!"

Fat interrupted excitedly. "Just plain, everyday black-crowned night herons! And what are those great big white cusses, Skinny, with the black heads and necks? Those are the ones I mean; the fellers that make such a gobbling noise and flap their wings faster than herons. Gemini, I believe they 're—"

"Hammerheads," said Jeff.

"Wood-ibises," agreed Fred.

"They 're a species of stork," he continued, "with long, downward curved bills like true ibises. They 're supposed to be growing scarce, but there seems to be plenty on this meadow."

"And what 's that big bluish-gray bird 'way out beyond the rest and not seemin' to pay any attention to them?"

"It 's—it 's—by hicks, I do believe it 's a—"

"What?" almost shouted Fat.

"It 's a crane!" joyfully announced his chum, "a sand-hill crane! And those fellows *are* scarce! Wow, this *is* great!"

For nearly half an hour the boys, fascinated, watched the ever-changing scene before them. The marsh-birds did not remain stationary,

but time and again took flight, whole swarms at a time, as if at a given signal. Around and around they circled, chattering, squalling, and honking, the heavens teeming with them, and then alighted in the identical sector just vacated. Or it might be a round dozen who flew, several species intermingled, but they invariably returned to their starting-point.

"I thought those chaps were nesting now," observed Fat. "That being the case, why are they all out on the meadow like that?"

"Some are nestin' an' some ain't," Jeff informed him. "I reckon some o' them egrets are, an' perhaps some o' those little blue fellers, but most are done finished. A good many start breedin' in Febuary, though some don't make it until April, but it's May neow, yuh know."

"But the egret plumes? If they were nesting now, you ought to see the plumes on their backs, should n't you. That's what I've always thought."

"No, suh; the plumes are thar, layin' close down against thar backs so's yuh cyan't see them until yuh git closer than we are. It's

only when they 're courtin' that the feathers stick up, an' then it 's a beautiful sight. When Mrs. Egret meets Mr. Egret nyar thar nest, then each sticks up thar plumes in greetin', as it war; but when they 're feedin' on the meader, they 're very exclusive an' keep 'em flat down."

"Hum," grunted Fat, disappointed. "I was hoping to see the plumes in action."

"So yuh may. Jest watch 'em close for a while. Sometimes Mr. Egret gits sort o' love-sick even while he 's feedin', an' makes up to the missis. Thar, see that?"

One of the smaller white birds suddenly began bowing and scraping like an old-fashioned beau. A demure little bird beside it became affected in a similar manner. Backward and forward they minced, and sideways; and then the watchers drew a quick breath. Out had flashed the gorgeous filmy plumes up from their backs and forward until each bird seemed buried in a mass of lacy fringe. Then down sank the plumes, and up sprang their owners to wing their way homeward to a hidden nest.

"Gummy!" exclaimed Fred; "that was great! It's a shame the plumes ever drop off."

"Yes, suh, it is!" the guide heartily agreed. "In a few weeks from now they 'll all be gone, jest plumb drapped away, an' the egrets 'll be jest as plain as those white herons fo' the rest o' the year. Then when next breedin'-season arrives out they 'll grow agin."

"Can you tell me, Jeff Down, how anybody can have the heart to shoot the birds off the nest just for the sake of the plumes?" earnestly demanded Paul. "They are the most gorgeous things I have ever seen."

"No, suh, I cannot! Thar's bound to be skunks in the world jest the same as decent folks, an' it's the skunks that does it. Thar's right smart of 'em around hyar, too, I 'm sorry to say. Some men make a livin' that-a-way, but I reckon most of us would rather starve first."

"And the plume-hunters actually exist in spite of the laws against them?"

"They sho' do. Thar ain't no enforcing o' the game-laws in this hyar State."

"Well, though I hate to say it," later declared Fred with a glance at the sinking sun, "I 'm afraid it 's growing late and we 'd better return to camp."

"I expect yuh 're right," admitted Jeff. "We 'd better move back to the canoe."

"Wait a moment," demanded Paul. "Look at the birds!"

The herons were in the air again, circling and soaring, and seeming alarmed at some unseen intrusion. Around they swept, but made no attempt to alight. After hovering uncertainly a few minutes over the feeding-ground, the entire flock broke up and dribbled off over the meadow in twos, threes, and fours.

"What do you suppose was the reason for that, Jeff?" Paul inquired. "Is that the way they generally quit for the night?"

"No; it war an alligator, I reckon. It probably sprawled out in thar midst lookin' fo' an easy mouthful, an' frightened 'em away. They have a habit of doin' that. Hold on! Listen to that, will yuh!"

From afar off came the faint *klee-klee* of some startled bird. With hurriedly beating

hearts, the boys tightened their grasps on their shot-guns and stared in the direction of the sound, a sound which once heard, could never be forgotten. It was the cry of a parrakeet.

CHAPTER IX

PAUL, THE FISHERMAN

“**T**HERE, that settles it!” exultantly cried Fred. “If that was n’t the call of a parrakeet, then I never heard one of that family before in my life!”

“It sure was!” his companions agreed in one breath.

“Then come on!” shouted Fred, hurrying toward the meadow which separated them from the forest whence rose the sound. “Come on; we ’ll get right after them!”

“Whoa, thar, hold them horses o’ yourn,” Jeff drawled. “Of course it’s them parra-keets, but it’s too late to seek ’em to-day. Thar, look at the sun hangin’ jest above the tree-tops. It ’ll be dark in an hour. Yuh all can git ’em to-morrer.”

There was no denying the good sense of Jeff’s words. It would have been twilight

before they reached the other side of the meadow. Therefore, grumbling, the hunters returned to the canoe and in ten minutes were back at camp.

"If it's too late to hunt parrakeets, it's not too late to catch one of those bass we saw jumping a while ago," Paul declared in a businesslike voice, fitting together the joints of a light steel casting-rod that he had insisted upon bringing along. "You fellows can go ahead with building a fire and getting the cooking-utensils ready, and I'll get you something to put in 'em."

He selected a bright green spinner shaped like a torpedo and covered with hooks that seemed to sprout from it like the spines from the shell of a sea-urchin; and, having threaded the rod, he secured it to the end of the line. Making sure that the reel revolved freely, he embarked alone in the canoe, and slowly and carefully worked out toward an open pool in the slough.

Paul was not an expert fisherman, but he was more than ordinarily fond of the sport. He had never before tried casting, but felt

that, if left to work it out by himself, he could master the art in a very short time. Unfortunately for his peace of mind, however, Fred became interested in the piscatorial preparations and accompanied him to the edge of the slough. There he remained, watching and offering uncalled-for advice, while his chum commenced his amateurish efforts.

"Here, that's not the way," Fred called, when the stout lad flicked the heavy spinner ten feet from the canoe and stripped in the line by hand. "Reel in the plug until it dangles about a foot from the tip of the pole and then sling it out just as if you were throwing an apple with a stick. When it hits the water, reel in slowly."

Paul, realizing the logic of this, did as he was told. Fred, after all, seemed to hold a few wise thoughts in his brain. He swished the rod through the air with all his might. Nothing happened.

"Take your thumb off the reel when the rod's half-way around," ordered Fred.

Paul again did as he was told, and the spin-

ner sang through the air, only to catch up with a jerk as the reel, turning too fast, caused the line to back-lash. The plug fell with a splash amid some pickerel-weed and clung there. Paul busied himself with untangling the line, and then paddled across the pool to release the spinner.

"Don't allow it to run out so fast next time," warned the other from the bank.

"Aw, shut up!" Fat growled ungraciously, his patience showing signs of strain. "You go back to the fire, Skinny, and leave me alone. I can work it out by myself."

But Fred grinned provokingly and held his ground. He knew that his presence and advice only served to embarrass his chum, and, therefore, tease that he was, he maintained his position on the bank.

Again Paul attempted a cast, this time with more success, and the spinner fell in open water. He reeled in slowly, nevertheless causing the paddles on the bait to twirl at great speed, but with barren result. Three times he threw and did not strike a fish.

"Better try another pool," advised Fred, with a tantalizing laugh, but Fat gritted his teeth and in silence cast again.

Scarcely this time had the spinner struck the water than the fisherman felt a sharp tug at the line. There was no sudden swirl or heavy splash, just a single hard pull. With a whoop of joy mingled with derision at Fred, he jerked the rod. Then, assured that the fish was hooked, he began to reel slowly in. The rod bent as under a great weight and the fish began a furious struggle.

"That-a-boy!" encouraged Fred from the shore. "You got him that time, Fat! Take it easy; he's a big one!"

Inch by inch, foot by foot, the large fish approached the vessel. So strong was the pull that the canoe was dragged across the pool toward a patch of lily-pads, and the boy was hard put to it to prevent the line from becoming wrapped around their stems.

"Look out you don't lose him in the pads," warned Fred. "There, that's right, now you've got him! Be careful he doesn't drop off as you lift him into the boat."

But there was small chance of losing that fish. Having worn the creature out until it lay helpless alongside the canoe, Paul, for lack of a landing-net, grasped the line in his fingers and slowly hove his catch over the gunwale. It was heavy, and he had to pull hard. Up it came, and then, with a thud, landed at his feet. It was a small alligator!

Paul stared at his catch in stunned amazement. An alligator! From the shore came a whoop of utter abandon, and out of the corner of his eye he saw Fred doubled up with mirth. He could not avoid a good-humored grin himself, but it was short-lived. The alligator, left to its own resources and recovering its strength, made its presence painfully felt.

The young creature was not more than two feet long, but it had a large mouth and sharp teeth which it lost no time in using. Paul had *stolen* it; a hook of the spinner had caught it through the tail; and the youngster had come into the canoe hind side foremost. This reverse condition was quickly remedied, and the little terror sank its teeth into one of Paul's tough leather shoes.

Perhaps that was the most fortunate thing that could have occurred. The small teeth were not of sufficient length to penetrate deep into the flesh, and the reptile merely clung there. Clamping a precautionary hand over its muzzle, the fisherman released the hook from the leathery tail. This accomplished, he grasped the body just back of the head, and, as the alligator loosened its grip on the shoe, with a heave he tossed it back into the water. This procedure was greeted with a howl of delight from the figure on the bank.

"Shut up!" Fat growled sharply, though with an inward chuckle. "Do you want to scare all the fish away, you laughing hyena?"

"Goin' to try it again, Fat?" hilariously gulped the other.

"Of course," was the short response.

"You'll probably hook a sea-cow next."

Disdaining to answer, Paul reeled in and sent the spinner hurtling over the water. He was becoming an expert. The piece of painted wood fell with a slight splash and slowly moved back toward the canoe. This time there was no mistaking the fact that he

had a fish on. There came a sudden splash that deluged the astonished boys with spray, and the reel sang as the line tore through the little agate guides. It was no alligator.

Despite every effort to restrain it, the reel continued to unwind at a perilous rate. The frail steel rod bent almost double as the fish altered its direction and darted under the craft. More line it took, and then all grew slack. The rod straightened and the boy gathered in a limp, weightless line.

"Oh," he groaned, "that's tough luck! Lost him! Ouch, what's that?"

A great fish leaped from the water not ten feet from the canoe, and, vainly shaking itself as if to get rid of something that clung to its mouth, plunged back. Paul felt a slight jerk on the line.

"He's still on!" he gurgled joyfully. "And he's—"

The words were cut short by another whizz of the reel, and the end of the canoe shot around. Away rushed the fish, with the boat after it, across the pool and back again. The strain on the rod slackened, and Paul regained

a few yards of line. The fish plunged deep down into the depths. Up it came, and Paul reeled in more line.

Time and again the performance was repeated, until at last the victim rose docilely to the surface beside the craft. Once more arose that all-important question, would the line hold the enormous dead weight when he pulled the fish out of the water? Having learned caution from his first attempt, the boy leaned over the side and inspected his catch before hauling it in. The fish lay on its side apparently exhausted, with gills feebly moving.

Satisfied by what he saw, Paul grasped the line close to its head, and, with a heave which required all his strength, dragged his quarry from the water and allowed it to drop into the bottom of the canoe. Then, with a relieved sigh, he grasped his paddle and urged the craft toward shore.

"There you are, Skinny!" he declared in triumphant accents as he stepped from the canoe. "Now you can laugh all you please!"

But Skinny, lost in jealous amazement, was

beyond words. He inspected the giant bass that Paul held up and stared at his chum in admiration. The fish was an enormous one of its species, nearly three feet long, and with a mouth that would hold a grape-fruit. Later, they found that it weighed exactly fourteen and three quarters pounds!

"By Jove!" Fred finally murmured, while they advanced in triumph toward the fire, "I never really half believed the stories of big large-mouth bass down here, but I'm cured now! Golly, that's a whopper, Fat!"

Jeff did not seem half so impressed as had Fred, but nevertheless he congratulated Paul upon his success. When told about the alligator, he laughed heartily.

After the giant fish had been cut up and fried in fractions, they sat around the fire eating and talking. Darkness had fallen long ere this, and mosquitos had ventured forth in hordes. Jeff filled his pipe and the boys, between slaps, related yarns of South America. Presently the man chuckled.

"I war jest thinkin' of that thar alligator Fat caught," he explained. "I never heard

o' one bein' took that-a-way befo', though thar are several other methods used. Did yuh ever hear how them regular professionals do it?"

"No; how, Jeff?"

The man cleared his throat, and, relighting his pipe, began to speak.

CHAPTER X

THE EGRET ROOKERY

“**T**HAR ’S several ways,” Jeff began. “Some fellers go around collectin’ ’gator eggs an’ hatchin’ ’em. Yuh generally find the eggs in a little mound of sand covered with chunks o’ moss or grass roots, or somethin’ like that.”

“Near large bodies of water, I suppose?” ventured Paul.

“Not a-tall, not a-tall; no, suh, they ’s generally found back from the rivers and lakes, right out in the woods near cypress-swamps an’ the like. When the hunter finds the eggs, he jest fetches ’em some place whar they ’re safe an’ covers ’em up again, allowin’ them to hatch by themselves. Yuh see, they don’t need no mother ’gator sittin’ on ’em like a hen. No, suh, alligator eggs is self-incubators.

“Another method that saves a bit o’ time is

catchin' 'em from the nest after they's hatched. The hen 'gator builds a tunnel near the nest, the nest bein' in a sort o' boggy place whar thar 's water enough to half fill the tunnel. When the eggs hatch, the little 'gators duck into this hyar and live thar until they've growed a bit bigger.

"Presently along comes the collector an' spies the mouth of the tunnel with maybe a sort o' shallow basin scooped out in front of it. He ain't quite sure that Ma Alligator ain't in the hole, but he takes a chance an' sticks his head down in the mouth. Then he starts barkin' and gruntin' fit to kill. Ef Ma 'Gator is to home she 's liable to come out investigatin', an' then Mr. Collector clears out about twice as fast as he can run. Ef she don't happen to be thar, the little ones come runnin' out thinkin' he 's thar ma callin' them, and all he has to do is to scoop 'em up and chuck 'em in a sack."

"Gemini," cried Fred, "that's a new one on me! Don't they ever catch the big ones, Jeff?"

"Yes, suh, but that ain't quite so easy. They

generally loops a rope around thar heads, either when they 're sleepin' out in the sun, or when they come out o' thar holes. When the loop tightens up, then the fun begins. Anything from an eight-foot 'gator up ain't any weakling. When he gits his claws sot in the mud he's harder to move an' more stubborn than six mules. The alligator-catcher must be a nervy cuss. When he gits the rope around its head he has to step lively. The 'gator, as soon as he finds he's in trouble, starts to fight, and the collector has to sally in an' wind him up with the rope. It's a matter of gittin' a half-hitch around his tail an' drawin' it to his head, but it ain't so easy as it sounds. Many a feller has found that out at the cost of a broken leg or worse, jest from a leetle slap o' that tail.

"But when the man gits tail an' head hooked together, the rest is simple. He jest ropes the snout together an' ties the critter's legs in a heap. Then Mr. 'Gator is finished so far as fightin' 's concerned."

"It's not a sport I'd relish particularly," grinned Paul, shaking his head with decision.

"No, Jeff, I'd be willing to try my hand at most anything else."

"Catchin' diamond-backs f' instance, or cottonmouths?" quizzically inquired the man.

Paul winced. "No," he admitted, "we'll put them on the list, too. Rattlesnakes, water-moccasins, and alligators are in the exemption column so far as I'm concerned."

The conversation languished, and presently the boys retired to their tent. Jeff rolled himself in a blanket beside the fire, and quickly, despite the swarm of droning mosquitos that hovered about his head, fell asleep. The occupants of the tent lay for some time in their hammocks, which had been brought in lieu of cots, before they closed their eyes. Although they were incased in netting, the overpowering hum of insects kept them awake.

Numerous crickets were busy, scraping with wing and thigh. One of those queer night-fowl so nearly related to the whippoorwill, a chuck-wills-widow, took its stand not ten feet in back of the tent on a fallen branch, and filled the night with its weird, oft repeated call, *chuck-will's-widow*. From a

distant marsh came a curious gobbling, gulping sound, arising from the throat of a night-prowling heron. A dull roar sounded from the slough, followed by a moan and a grunt.

Paul turned uneasily in his hammock, and his chum heard him demand in a whisper what it was. Again came the sound.

"They're frogs," Fred replied, grinning at the other in the darkness. "They're just common ordinary bullfrogs."

"Come off, Skinny; what are you giving me?" grumbled the fat boy in a tone of disbelief. "Those are not like any bullfrogs I ever heard. They sound to me more like a flock of pigs."

"It's the Southern variety, Fat, found here in Florida. There; listen to that! That's an alligator."

All other noises were dimmed by a deep-throated bellow that arose from the slough. It was repeated once, and then the frogs again took up the chorus.

At daylight the parrakeet-hunters were aroused by Jeff, who informed them that he

must soon be leaving. After a hearty breakfast, which the boys found already prepared by the earlier rising "cracker," he bade them farewell.

"I hate to leave yuh," he said, "but I reckon yuh can take care of yo'selves. Ef anything should turn up that yuh wanted to git word about back to the ranch, thar's a boundary-house some five mile to the west o' hyar. The Thrasher boundary-fence runs through that thar forest on the other side of the meader whar we saw the herons yesterday. All yuh 've got to do is to follow that along until yuh come to the house. Thar's a telephone thar, an' the man in charge will fix yuh up in anything yuh want. Ef thar's no word to the contrary I'll be back hyar at this place day after to-morrer, an' yuh can change camp ef yuh want to. Now, so-long."

Five minutes later, with a splutter from the engine and a lurch of the car, Jeff departed, and the boys found themselves alone in the Everglades.

"Now I guess it's up to us," gravely declared Fred, as the swaying jitney truck drew

out of sight. "What do you suggest, Fat, as the first move?"

"There's only one answer to that," was the quick response. "We'll cross the slough and the heron meadow, and just gather in those parrakeets we heard last night. Grab the camera and your gun, and come on."

Thus, ten minutes later, they clambered into the canoe loaded down with shot-guns, a camera, a light folding tripod of aluminum, and a leather case filled with plates. These, all but the guns, they intended to cache in the forest until the feeding-ground of the parrakeets was discovered. The hunt was actually under way.

Scarcely had the boys crossed the slough and set foot upon the island where they had landed the previous evening than they were startled by a distant, muffled booming noise. Hurriedly forcing a passage through the heavy brush, they soon stood at the edge of the meadow, which, as usual, was covered with herons of a dozen varieties. The sound they had heard had come from the high land on the other side.

"What did you think it was, Fat?" asked Fred, gazing doubtfully at the dark line of trees a quarter of a mile away.

Before his chum could answer, the silence was again broken, and this time by a sound that both recognized. It was the double report of a gun, and not far off. Some herons that flew above the trees in that direction suddenly swerved and climbed skyward on frantic beating wings.

"Some one else is hunting around here!" exclaimed Paul uneasily, and, with a start, he held up his hand. He thought he caught the distant call of a parrakeet. "Did you hear it?" he demanded.

Fred nodded. "It's a parrakeet!"

"And some one is shooting at it!" groaned the other.

"That's so!" his companion muttered. "Suppose they—"

His supposition was cut short by Paul, who, with an excited "Come on, Skinny," departed across the meadow at a ponderous run. Slinging the camera over his shoulder, Fred

hastened after his chum, plunging through the coarse grass in his wake.

Being thinner and more wiry and longer of leg, Fred soon caught up with the elephantine leader and presently passed him. The path he chose was one fraught with difficulties. The ground, though solid to the eye, in reality was a shaking quagmire, cut by numerous rivulets underlaid with bottomless depths of soft, black, oozing mud. It became necessary to leap with great care across these lest a misstep precipitate them bodily and without warning into the clinging ooze.

From tussock to tussock they jumped, avoiding all open flats which might prove treacherous underfoot, and ever watched where their footsteps fell. The verdure in some places came to their waists and even to their shoulders; in others it was short and the going, though dangerous, was rapid. A few stunted bushes grew on the meadow, but otherwise it was bare of thickets, being thickly dotted with tall, graceful herons.

Once Fred, still in the lead, leaped quickly

aside, and, with the muzzle of his gun, prodded at a sedge clump. There followed a rustle, the dart of a slim dark body, and something white shot from the grass and struck at the metal barrels.

"A cottonmouth," panted the boy, as the snake glided off into the grass. Lifting the gun-barrel, he pointed to several tiny drops of colorless moisture that adhered to the surface. "Poison," he muttered, and carefully wiped the metal clean with blades of grass.

Paul shuddered. Despite much and varied experience with snakes, he had never quite overcome an inborn repugnance for the reptiles. The cottonmouth, the deadly water-moccasin of the South, is one that is not calculated to lessen prejudices in that direction. The stout boy had caught a fleeting glance of a pair of wide-open jaws, snow-white inside as a tuft of the cotton from which their owner takes its name, and that was sufficient. He felt ill, but his determination to go on was not lessened.

They pressed forward. Numerous boat-tailed grackles, large as our own purple

grackle, with broad, kite-shaped tails, flew up ahead of them. Several small marsh-finches flashed up from beneath their feet. A huge bittern, brown speckled and barred, rose with a squawk from a low growth of cat-tails, startling them by its hurry. And out on a near-by flat they saw a lone Florida gallinule, slate-blue and red-wattled, flirting its short white tail-feathers as it stalked majestically from them into the reeds.

Reaching higher land, the hunters plunged into the forest in the direction from which had come the shots and the call of the parrakeet. The trees here were different from most others they had thus far encountered in Florida. Aside from the wide-spread live-oaks were gumbo-limbos, with their red, papery bark which could be peeled like white birch, and from whose bark, when wounded, exudes an aromatic gum. There was the satinleaf, which has a golden brown, satin-like lining to its leaves; the laurel-cherry whose leaves, when crushed, give forth a bitter-almond odor like prussic acid; the wild tamarind, of fern-like foliage and white bark; the mastic or

wild olive-tree; the fiddlewood-tree; and the pigeon-plum. Many of the trees were bound together by thin lianas, not so large as seen in tropical forests, but equally tenacious. Many were armed with long, recurved hooks, which impeded progress and inflicted painful wounds. Spanish moss hung in profusion from the branches, most of which were lined with pineapple-like air-plants and dainty ferns. It was a paradise of verdure.

But, for all the density of the forest, the walking was not bad. So close were the tree-tops in many places that there was little undergrowth, and the collectors made good time. Hundreds of birds, robins, Southern flickers, blue-jays, and others, flitted through the trees around them, filling the woods with a pleasant chatter as they gathered to feed on the ripening fruit of the gumbo-limbo. But in all the bird sound there was not a single note of the ones they sought.

"This is the place for them," stated Fred with evident satisfaction. "There is at least one parrakeet in these woods, for we heard it

after the shots. It's the most ideal spot I've yet seen."

They pressed forward, skirting numerous swampy areas, hummocks choked with foliage, but always maintaining the direction that led them toward the heart of the forest. Presently the trees thinned abruptly, and they paused to draw breath at the edge of a large open glade.

There the ground gradually fell away to form a watery basin about two hundred yards across, surrounded on all sides by the heavy mass of jungle. The surface of the lagoon was a bed of reeds, through which, here and there, could be caught gleams of water. Around its edge, with their queer, rounded "knees" protruding from the water at varying distances from the trunks, stood a few cypress-trees, but the true border, on soil scarcely moist, was a close-growing belt of wild olives. Several lone cypresses and tamarinds studded the center, rearing like tall sentinels to guard the contents of the lagoon. A few clumps of dense high brush, rounded,

perfect islands of dark green against the brown of the reeds, completed the picture.

But not quite. As the boys broke through the encircling border of thick, interlaced branches, and burst, knee-deep in water, into the thinner belt of cypress, their eyes were greeted by a sight which alone well repaid their journey to Florida. The islands of brush set in the middle of the lagoon were studded with scores of birds that glittered white in the rays of the morning sun. A dozen great snowy creatures, alarmed by the intrusion, soared majestically to the taller branches of the scattered trees. A large blue Ward's heron flapped slowly off over the forest. A pair of graceful long-necked, slate-colored birds peered defiantly at them from an over-hanging bough of a near-by tamarind. An anhinga, in uneven flight, circled the glade high above the trees. They had stumbled on an egret rookery.

Awe-struck, the boys took in the scene before them, the beauty of it, the moss-spangled cypresses, the feathery tamarinds, the islands of emerald, the flashes of living light; and

then their eyes fell upon an object drifting in the water at their feet. It was white, bedraggled almost beyond recognition, and covered with blood—a white heron.

An egret, actually on the threshold of its home, possibly one of the very pair yesterday seen courting on the meadow, lay dead and bleeding before them. This, then, had been the object at which the shots had been fired, and not the parrakeet.

For a few seconds the hunters gazed, speechless, at the body. It told its own story. Plume-hunters were at work. Anger filled their souls. They almost wished that it had been a parrakeet rather than this beautiful creature. The utter contemptibleness of it!

“The vandals!” exploded Fat, stooping to pick up the poor remains. “Look here, Fred, the skin on the whole back has been torn off! Probably this poor chap has a nest out there with a pair of starving, half-grown young ones.”

“As Jeff has already told us once or twice, there are plenty of skunks left in the world,” quietly declared Fred, but the dangerous

sparkle in his eyes belied the mildness of his tone.

“And as I said back there in New York,” vindictively added the other, “hanging’s too good for them. Heavens, did you ever see so many egrets?”

Fred silently shook his head, and, taking his chum by the arm, led him back to dry land. “Now, Fat, it’s up to us,” he soberly stated. “That plume-hunter must still be around. The shots were n’t fired very long ago, and it’s our business to see that he does n’t fire any more.”

“I guess you’re right, Skinny,” Paul agreed. “We’ll let the parrakeets go hang for a while until we’ve cleared this matter up.”

CHAPTER XI

AN UNREQUITED SEARCH

BUT the plume-hunter, alarmed by the approach of the boys, or perhaps satiated with killing—the mutilated corpses of ten other egrets floated on the surface of the lagoon—had fled the vicinity. A thorough search of the jungle that surrounded the lagoon failed to produce any trace of the man save a few exploded cartridges and the remains of the birds already mentioned. Satisfied that the culprit had escaped them, at the end of an hour of diligent search the boys gave it up.

“I reckon he ’s got through for the day and left,” Paul finally concluded aloud.

“I guess you ’re right,” his chum agreed. “Now, as long as he ’s gone, let ’s get down to the business that brought us here. The first thing, I vote, is to hide the camera and plates

somewhere where we can find them. They 're heavy, and I'm tired of lugging them around."

The camera, plates, and light tripod were deposited beneath a low, smooth-leaved holly that grew near the margin of the lagoon, and, thus lightened of their loads, which hitherto in the excitement of the chase had been forgotten, they started in earnest to seek for the parrakeets.

"Remember, no shooting, Fat," Fred cautioned his companion when they were about to separate for the hunt, this being the best manner in which to cover the forest. "We know for certain that the birds are here, and the main thing is to get a photograph of one, which will act as absolute evidence of their presence. The museum would rather have that than a skin, for the birds are almost extinct, and by killing one we might break up the last existing pair."

"All right, old Skinny Shanks," the other retorted, with an affectionate grin, "I won't shoot any to-day, at any rate. To-morrow will be time enough for that. If we can locate

the berry-tree on which they feed, that is all we want. The whole proposition rests on finding the tree, eh?"

"And with the telescopic lens, snapping a picture," completed his chum. "How do you propose to hunt?"

"With my eyes and ears, you old shovel-handle," was the endearing retort; then seriously, "Suppose I take the forest on the west side of the lagoon and you the eastern part?"

"All right, I'll have a look for the boundary-fence at the same time," and with these words they separated.

Fred did not forget the plume-hunters, and during his search for the parrakeets he determined to remain within a short distance of the rookery. Having come to the east end of the lagoon, he plunged into the dense tropical growth that surrounded it, and, pausing every few moments to listen, forced his way through the forest.

The air was heavy and hot and moist, reminding him of a hothouse atmosphere. His progress was slow. The going underfoot was not bad, but every few yards he halted to

strain his ears for sound of the birds he sought. His eyes traveled from tree-top to tree-top, taking in every mysterious bunch of leaves, every sudden movement of twigs, and every bird that flitted to and fro in the sunlight. He noted objects on the ground, a startled marsh-hare, a large turtle with a rounded shell eighteen inches long and locally known as a gopher, and a raccoon, more yellowish than the northern variety with which he was familiar, which rushed up a tree at his approach and quickly was hidden by the screening leaves. Of cattle there was an abundance, but they seemed gentle, seldom lifting their heads from their eternal browsing as he approached.

Passing a tall cabbage-palmetto which stood alone in a sea of green-leaved, dicotyledonous trees, his attention was caught by a weak rustle near its base. For several moments he saw nothing, but presently the slight movement of a dead leaf directed his eyes toward a small heap at its base, and he discovered a tiny forest-rat nibbling away for all it was worth at a palm-nut. From its size he

knew that he was looking at the cotton-rat which inhabits South Florida.

Scarcely had his eyes fallen on the tiny rodent than he became aware that some other animal used the same pile of leaves for concealment. His ears detected a louder rustle than before, and the little rat ceased its noisy munching. It crouched motionless, save for a faint tremor, apparently held spellbound by invisible cords wrought of terror. A long black form slid from the hiding-place among the leaves.

In that second the rat leaped, but too late. There followed a flurry of leaves, and a pair of wide gaping jaws closed upon the little form. The rodent gave forth a tiny squeak and suddenly was silent, a crushed lifeless form in the jaws of a large black snake. With a disgusted shudder, Fred moved on, but even before he progressed ten feet from the spot the unfortunate victim had almost entirely disappeared into that capacious maw.

That was the way of the jungle, the boy thought philosophically, and the incident was soon forgotten. But ere he had traversed half

a mile it was brought back to his mind in a startling manner.

Again he had paused beside a cabbage-palm, but this time there were several of the trees occupying a small glade in the forest. They were scattered about this open area, and the coarse grass that grew beneath them had been grazed short by cattle until it resembled the surface of a well cut lawn. And squarely in view, lying quietly in the sun, sprawled two more black snakes.

Fred's first inclination was to open an attack with a stick, but on second thought he changed his mind. After all, these Florida gopher-snakes, though plentiful, were harmless creatures to mankind. If they lived on the flesh of other animals, so, for that matter, did mankind. It was only the memory of the cotton-rat that had aroused his first instinct to kill.

A moment later he was glad that he had held his hand. The two snakes, lying dormant within three feet of each other, suddenly seemed to come to life. The reptile nearest the boy raised its head several inches from the

ground and began moving it back and forth. The other followed its lead. Back and forth swung the heads; and then the bodies began to move. The first snake moved forward a few inches, and, pausing, moved back. The second did likewise. Again was the performance repeated, and again. The two approached until they almost touched, and then politely backed away.

The boy watched, fascinated. He was viewing for the first time an occurrence that he had heard of but had never seen. The two black gopher-snakes were courting.

And then, even as he watched, a third party broke in upon the scene. Fred was suddenly startled by a swish in the air overhead, and, without further warning, a large bird plunged down through an opening in the palms squarely upon the snake nearest him. The spectator stepped back and, thunderstruck, watched the ensuing struggle.

It was a battle!

The red-shouldered hawk seized its prey in both talons, one clawed foot grasping at the base of the neck and the other farther

down along the neck. The sharp talons penetrated through the black, shiny scales, and met in the flesh beneath. The victim, a medium-sized reptile about five feet long, struggled ineffectively to escape this ever-tightening grip of death. The long prehensile tail flashed up and coiled about the body of the hawk. The bird beat frantically with its wings, and with its cruel beak tore at its quarry's exposed helpless head. Snake Number Two, at the first appearance of this swift flying death, had fled.

Over and over rolled the pair, the black coil ever tightening over the feathery body, the wicked bill ever pounding and tearing. And the bill won. The watcher saw the coil slowly loosen its tight hold and drop away from the hawk. The tail alone quivered slightly; the rest of the body lay slack, spineless as a piece of rotten rope. The hawk, triumphant, twice fluttered its wings, and then flew off, bearing with it its hard-earned meal.

Fred turned southward in his search for the wire fence. He was greatly impressed by the scene just witnessed. It had only needed

a shot from his gun to complete the chain of death, or life. Which was it? he wondered. The palm-tree, the fruit, the cotton-rat, the gopher-snake, the hawk, and himself; all but the last depended upon the one before it for a living. He had stumbled on nature's mode of life.

Two hundred yards to the south of the glade the boy found the boundary-fence. It consisted merely of five strands of barbed wire nailed to trees. As these did not grow in straight lines, the fence of necessity was an irregular affair, zigzagging back and forth to meet the trunks, but running in a general direction east and west.

Turning, Fred followed the line westward. Thus far he had caught neither glimpse nor sound of parrakeets. Despite the calls the boys had heard earlier in the morning and the night before, the jungle seemed as barren of the birds, as an oak-grove in Connecticut. Aside from the overpowering heat, the tropical character of the jungle, and the streamers of hanging Spanish moss, the hunter might have been tramping a wood on Long Island.

Somewhat downcast by lack of results, the boy pressed doggedly on. Having progressed three quarters of a mile, he figured that he must be opposite the lagoon, and turned northward. According to his calculations he could not be more than three hundred yards from the edge of the rookery. Paul would be returning shortly, and he was eager to learn the result of *his* explorations.

Ten minutes later Fred caught, still far on ahead, the gleam of light that denoted a break in the trees, and hastened his steps. The rookery was almost in sight. Not a hostile sound had come from there during his absence, and he felt that, despite his failure—and probably that of his chum—to locate the parakeets, they had as a slight recompense, by their presence, served to drive away the plume-hunter.

But, even as these thoughts crowded through his brain, he was brought to a halt by a sharp report not fifty yards distant, and the crash of hurriedly trampled underbrush. Turning without an instant's hesitation, he sprang in the direction of the noise.

CHAPTER XII

BATTLE OF THE SAURIANS

HAVING left his companion at the lagoon, Paul traveled eastward. He moved slowly and cautiously like a soldier on scout duty in enemy territory, with senses keenly alert and eyes sharpened to catch the first suspicious movement in the foliage overhead. The section traversed was spotted with dense swampy hummocks filled with palms of all sizes, from low-growing dwarfs to tall cabbage-palmettos. Aside from these the hummocks contained dense thickets of leafy trees whose crowns overshadowed the tallest palms; and underfoot were heavy masses of tangled undergrowth which made them difficult to penetrate.

It was in these swampy areas that berry-trees flourished, and it was feeding on the fruit of these that Paul hoped to discover the elu-

sive parrakeets. The way was heavy with obstacles. The undergrowth was hard to pierce, so laced and interlaced was it with running plants and lianas, which not only retarded progress but inflicted pain by their sharp thorns.

The boy persevered. Selecting as an objective a group of gumbo-limbo trees set deep in the center of a tangled hummock, he crawled toward them through the brush as best he could, and, for all his great proportions, with surprisingly little noise. When satisfied that no parrakeets were feeding on their fruit there he torturously withdrew and sought another clump. Thicket after thicket was covered in this manner; hummock after hummock. All were alive with birds, but not the ones he was after.

Not once but several times he startled small Florida deer that had been browsing on the leaves of lesser shrubs. And arriving at length before an open glade about fifty yards across and filled with dense briars, he in turn was startled by the crash of a large body as it made off through the brush. Taking it to

be merely a frightened deer, he paid the creature slight attention until it crossed the open space, ripping and tearing through the brier-patch; and then he discovered that he had scared a small Florida black bear. He paused, with a murmur of delight, to watch its retreat.

"Jove, this patch of forest is as good as being in a zoo! So far I've glimpsed more animals in an hour than a person would see in a whole day in the South American jungle! I wonder what it will be next? Parrakeets, I hope."

But in this he was destined to disappointment. His search proved as barren of result as did Fred's. At the end of two hours he found himself at the brink of the jungle, facing the meadow crossed earlier in the morning. The herons were there as they always had been, but fed half a mile off to the right, and Paul realized that he had reached the marsh some distance west of the crossing. Directly in front of him, extending into the open for a hundred yards, the grass, contrary to the rest of the meadow, was short and green. In-

stead of being firm underfoot, it was soft and boggy, marked with small pools of water. Black patches of mud also marred its green surface which was crisscrossed with narrow trails.

Curious to learn what had formed these paths, Paul moved cautiously to the edge of the greensward. The thin sod had been torn by the strong claws of some great beast that had crawled across the quaking surface. And fifty yards out beyond he saw one of the beasts.

The alligator was a large one, measuring full twelve feet in length, with a back ridged by black leathern scales that glistened dully in the full light of the sun. It lay sprawled out, flattened, half covered with mire, and asleep, basking in the warm rays. Near it stood a dozen tussocks of coarse, silvery reeds, forming an island in the little expanse of short grass.

The boy, much impressed by the size of the reptile, chose a seat on a fallen log that lay at the edge of the forest, with the idea of watching the monster while he rested from his walk. The alligator vouchsafed him no attention.

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It remained there, outstretched, with eyes closed, drawing slow and deep breaths.

Suddenly the watcher became aware of a movement among the reed tussocks and, to his surprise, saw a second alligator as large as the first emerge from the shelter of the little island. Half interested, the boy watched the new-comer advance toward its basking companion. Its movements seemed stiff and painful and sluggish. It slowly advanced to the side of the sleeper. Then, to Paul's unbounded astonishment, instead of settling down in the mud, it suddenly reared up on all fours with its belly clear of the ground.

The enormous jaws gaped wide open, and, with a species of muffled bellow that caused a shiver to run down the boy's spine, the new arrival rushed upon the unsuspecting prostrate one. Before the latter was aware of its presence, those cruel jaws, armed with rows of savage, wicked teeth, glanced from the tough scales on its back with a snap. And then, as if their touch had created an electric contact, the great flat tail of the basker swung in a sudden arc and caught the attacker a tre-

mendous blow on the flank, which sent it toppling over on its side.

Immediately the mud began to fly. Up rose both reptiles, jaw locked in jaw, wicked claws tearing and scratching, heads twisting from side to side, both panting and grunting. Higher they rose, tails thrashing, bellies off the ground, and claws working. The battling alligators stood nearly upright, balanced by hind legs and tails, grunting, wrenching, and tearing. Then, unbalanced in their desperate struggles, they slipped and again went down in the mud. Over and over they rolled, jaws still tightly locked, and then on their feet, up into a V, and down again.

The boy rose from his log, and, fascinated, stood watching the gruesome battle, aghast at its horror. Never before had he witnessed a sight that so filled his entire being with loathing. It nauseated him to watch—those glistening teeth, the snap of jaws, the throaty rumbles, the sighs!

Sick and dizzy, he tore his eyes from the haunting spectacle and reëntered the forest. The infuriated saurians were left to settle their

differences by themselves without a human witness.

As the underbrush closed about him, Paul heaved a deep sigh of relief. Such scenes belonged to prehistoric ages, he thought, not to the present. He had been taught that alligators were cowardly beasts, afraid of large animals and especially humans. Was that true? he wondered. A single blow of those swift-flung tails would brush a man aside as easily as if he were a fly. No wonder professional alligator-catchers must be alert and on the job! Ugh! That was one profession he would *not* take up.

The crash of a startled deer brought him back to a realization of where he was, and automatically his eyes sought the tree-tops. His hurried steps slowed, and once more he became the hunter.

The remainder of the trip back to the egret rookery proved uneventful. Like his chum, he was treated to no further indication of the presence of parrakeets.

Arriving at the lagoon, Paul found that his friend had not yet returned. The egrets ap-

parently had not been disturbed, and the rookery presented a quiet, peaceful appearance. A dozen of the snowy birds soared and flapped unconcernedly over the trees, flying to and from the meadow. Many cattle were scattered along the margin grazing peacefully on the coarse grass that grew there, and a few stood knee-deep in the water munching at the sun-browned reeds. Among these was a calf which, following close to its mother's side, was having a hard time to maintain a footing, so deep was the water for its shorter legs.

Paul, by nature soft-hearted, gazed doubtfully at the calf and scratched his head. "That fool cow!" he muttered; "she'll be drownin' her young one in a minute if she doesn't look out. There, what did I tell you?"

The animal in question, enticed by a greener patch of reeds farther out in the lagoon, with true bovine stupidity had hurried toward it and now stood up to her shoulders in water. Her offspring, a small month-old calf, brown-splashed and spotted with white, attempted to follow and almost immediately was en-

gulfed by the deepening water. Emitting a feeble bellow, it struck out frantically, its little hoofs beating the water into a foam and its body making small progress ahead. The hungry mother paid no attention to its struggles and continued to munch the green leaves without a backward glance.

Such callousness was too much for the indignant boy. With a whoop, dropping his gun, he dashed through the surrounding belt of trees into the lagoon straight for the cow. At the noise of his cries and the splash of his hurried approach, she lifted her head, and, tossing her long horns, turned and fled shoreward. The calf followed more slowly, but when its feet touched bottom it accelerated its gait and soon caught up. The pair, mother and son, with bobbing hind quarters and flirting tails, disappeared among the trees.

Highly pleased with himself, Paul returned to the shore. He felt that through his efforts the life of the calf had been saved.

The cattle along the margin had ceased their browsing and stared at him with fierce startled eyes. If the boy had noticed care-

fully he would have seen that they were not all cows, that, aside from several steers, there were one or two bulls. But he paid no attention to that fact and made straight toward them with the idea of driving them all away from the lagoon, so that there might be no more near-tragedies while he was around.

Instead of retreating as he advanced, the cattle gathered into a compact group and held their positions, tossing their heads and stamping the ground. Undaunted and unsuspecting, the boy hastened toward them, waving his arms, and in a loud voice ordered them to "Git out of there." He reached dry land, picked up his gun, and flung a dead branch at them.

This last defiance proved too much for the uneven temper of the bulls. Instead of running away, two advanced slowly toward him with threatening bellows and shaking heads. Then for the first time did a feeling that the affair was not working out properly enter the boy's head. The bulls advanced, not rapidly, but in a manner decidedly businesslike and convincing. Paul halted his own advance.

He stared uncertainly at the angry bulls. They broke into a slow trot. There could be no doubt of their intentions. Now, despite his great fleshiness, Paul was, upon occasion, a good runner. This was one of the occasions. Casting a frightened look at the two beasts he dashed off through the woods.

Because of the thickness of the trees, he was enabled to keep ahead of his pursuers for nearly a hundred yards. They blundered through the underbrush after him, their trot broken into a clumsy gallop, and their rage apparently increased at this inglorious retreat of the disturber of their peace. In and out they dodged among the close-growing trunks, gradually gaining, but still behind the human being who had dared threaten them and their herd.

When a hundred yards had been covered they had drawn close to Paul. With a glance behind, he put on an extra burst of speed and again forged ahead. The bulls blundered after him.

The chase could not go on for ever, and Fat knew it. The beasts were certain to overtake

him within the next few minutes. Driven to desperation, he circled a thick clump of underbrush and plunged toward a large cabbage-palm around whose trunk was wrapped a meshwork of roots from a gigantic strangling fig. While he was yet ten feet from its base, his toe caught in a running vine and he crashed to the ground. Scrambling up, he took a step forward and again went down. This time his finger caught on the trigger of his gun, and the weapon was discharged as he fell.

CHAPTER XIII

AN UNWELCOME INTRUDER

FRED heard the report of a gun and the plunge of a heavy body through the brush. Throwing his own weapon into a position of readiness, he hastened toward the commotion that was taking place not more than a hundred feet away. The cry of alarm in a voice he knew well caused him to redouble his speed, and he fairly flew through the forest.

Thus it was that scarcely five seconds had elapsed since the noise of the explosion when he burst through the bushes and arrived upon the scene of trouble. To his profound joy he beheld Fat, alone and unhurt, scrambling, with amazing speed and agility for one so hugely built, up into the roots of an enormous, strangling fig. Paul saw him at the same instant, and in a terrified voice bade him hide.

"Shin up a tree, Skinny! shin up a tree!" he warned in evident alarm for the safety of the other.

Instinctively obeying, Fred sprang toward a large gnarled trunk which rose in a sharp curve from the ground and, dividing ten feet up, ran as several distinct lianas into the tree-tops above. He was just in time. Even as he drew himself to safety the bushes parted and two large bulls, bellowing with rage, crashed into view, making straight for him. The sight was sufficient to urge him to greater efforts, and a second later he was ensconced in the triple fork of the great liana.

The infuriated beasts rushed at the liana, the leader fetching up with a crash against its thick trunk. The weight of the blow caused Fred to cling for dear life to his hold. The second bull charged at the base of the strangling fig and gored it.

But the boys were safe out of reach of those sharp-pointed horns. Around and around trampled the angry bulls, snorting and bellowing and shaking their ugly heads, their little, wicked bloodshot eyes glaring unavail-

ingly at their escaped victims. And then the boys, recovering from their alarm and safe seated on their perches, began to laugh!

"What have you been doing to them, Fat?" chuckled Fred, looking across at his chum. "They seem to be angry enough to eat you."

"I reckon they would," drawled the other, who was fast regaining his breath, and with it his good spirits. "I just tried to drive 'em from the lagoon," he continued ruefully, "and instead of that they undertook to drive me—and succeeded. What are we goin' to do with 'em?"

"I don't know," Fred laughed. "We're in a nice pickle, treed by two tame cultivated bulls!" Suddenly the speaker changed his tone to one of pain. "Ouch, Fat, this liana is all covered with thorns! I came up so fast that I did n't realize it at first, but now they're sticking into me from ten different directions. Something's got to be done right away or I'll be like a fish caught on that green spinner of yours."

"That's too bad, Skinny. They'll get tired of buttin' trees in a little while and leave us."

"Well, I wish they'd hurry!" was the pained response. "If they don't get out inside of two minutes I'm goin' to shoot. It's better to kill one than to die up here by inches. I can feel the thorns eatin' right into my vitals."

"Aw, they're a long way from your vitals yet," retorted the unfeeling Paul. "Don't shoot the bulls, Skinny; they belong to Mr. Whitehouse."

"What do I care? He'd rather I killed them than see me strung up here like a sparrow hung on a thorn by a butcher-bird. Come on, bulls, get out of there!"

The fury of the beasts seemed to have abated. After futilely goring at the gigantic vines that held the boys, and having uprooted a few bushes with their long pointed horns just to show what they could have done if they had had a human being at their mercy, they desisted and stared more calmly at the refugees. Then, at sound of Fred's painful, unmusical howls and blood-curdling yells, they turned tail and fled through the forest. The short siege was over.

The perch unfortunately chosen by Fred was an overgrown cockspur which, usually a scrambling shrub, here was a giant liana of the forest. The trunk was virtually bare of the long recurved spines, but the boy by evil chance had come into contact with some of the thorny running tendrils, which enveloped his body and clung to his garments as if held there by a hundred safety-pins. His descent was decidedly slow and painful.

"Whew!" he grunted, when at last upon the ground; "the next time I 'll take my chances down here!"

After a council of war, the boys decided to give the lagoon a wide berth for the remainder of the day; and they started back for the camp across the meadow. It was long after noon, and they strongly felt the need of refreshment after the long hike and exciting experiences of the morning.

"We 'll get something to eat first," advised Paul, "and then try in another direction. Although we both heard the parrakeets in this piece of jungle early this morning, they seem to have left. Perhaps they 're feeding on one

of the islands out on the meadow. At any rate, we 'll give the rookery a wide berth until we 're sure those cattle are thoroughly calmed down."

Having safely circumnavigated the lagoon, they set out for the meadow. Half an hour later they stood at its edge at the spot crossed earlier in the day. They had not paused to hunt during the journey, and the pace had been fast. Arriving there, both paused as if by common consent and stared at one another. The identical thought had struck them at the same moment.

"Gemini!" both exclaimed; "we 've left the camera behind!"

They stared foolishly at each other and then broke into roars of mirth. It was funny! The encounter with the bulls had driven the memory of their cache entirely out of mind.

"You go ahead, Fat, back to camp," suggested his chum, when their merriment had subsided. "I 'll return to the lagoon and retrieve it. You get the grub cooked while I 'm away. It won't take long."

Paul demurred at this, thinking of the

cattle, but Fred prevailed. Both, in their innermost hearts, knew that the cattle would not bother them again, but, boy-like, each liked to make believe that great danger lay in that direction. Presently, however, after much discussion Paul departed across the meadow and Fred returned to the woods.

An hour and a half later he joined Paul at the edge of the slough where lay the canoe, and soon was busy before the camp-fire disposing of canned beans washed down with steaming coffee brewed by his waiting chum. Having finished all the beans, together with several large biscuits coated with strawberry jam, he sat back with a sigh of satisfaction.

"There, that goes to the right spot," he grunted, and then demanded, with a queer sort of smile on his lips, "Who do you think I saw near the lagoon?"

"What do you mean?" was the surprised answer. "Did you see someone?"

Fred silently nodded.

"Who?" demanded Fat. "The plume-hunter?"

The other slowly shook his head. "I 'm not

sure, Fat," he said. "This is what happened: I'd just gotten back to the rookery and secured the camera when I heard a noise in the bushes. Thinking it was the cattle—they'd disappeared before I got there—I ducked behind a patch of grape-vines and sneaked off. Nothing more was heard for nearly a hundred yards, and I'd decided that everything was O. K. when I heard a crash behind me and turned around just in time to see a man plunge into a thicket of briars. He had tripped over a running vine, I suppose, for I'm sure he didn't mean to tumble into those brambles, not from the way he declaimed about things in general and that bush in particular when he stood up."

Instead of following his first inclination of going to the aid of the unfortunate man, Fred had slipped behind a clump of tall ferns, and from this place of concealment had watched him regain his feet. The man had done so with a volley of muttered exclamations and a blasphemous rubbing of bruised shins. He was a man of medium height, round-shouldered and stooping, whose ill-

fitting clothes sagged ungracefully from his thick, flabby body. His hair, peeping from beneath the brim of a wide-rimmed hat, was deep carrot in shade, and his ruddy face was adorned with whiskers and a goatee of the same hue. Although he did not present an attractive appearance, he did not have the air of an out-and-out ruffian.

Stooping to pick up the gun that had slipped from his hand, the man had walked with cautious tread in the direction of the hidden boy. His sharp little gray eyes had taken in each bush, each tree-trunk, and every opening in the jungle, as he advanced. Without a doubt he was looking for the lad, and Fred, unwilling to disappoint him, had coolly stepped into view.

"Good afternoon," he had said briefly.

"At that," Fred continued, speaking to his chum by the camp-fire, "the man drew back with a start of surprise, and, though he quickly recovered himself, he could n't prevent a guilty look from coming into his face. My appearance was sudden, you can bet, and wholly unexpected.

"But, as I said, he soon recovered from his astonishment, and, nodding, held out his hand. I grabbed it and shook it, but, Gemini, Fat, I might just as well have been shaking a lump of putty as that hand. He had n't as much strength in his grip as a soft-shelled crab. It sort of gave me the creeps, and for some reason I could n't help disliking him.

" 'How do you do?' I said again. 'This is a queer place to find another person.'

"At that he sort of drew back and looked at me queerly. Then, seeing that I had n't meant anything in particular, he replied: 'It is, indeed! May I inquire what you are doing here?'

"As if that was any business of his! But I just said: 'I 'm collecting, sir. One of the museums in New York has sent us down to do a little work for them in the field.'

" 'Us?' inquired the man in a surprised voice, though I have a feeling that he was n't surprised at all. 'Is there a large party of you?'

"I began to feel that he was trying to pump me. 'Just two of us,' I answered.

“ ‘What especially are you down for?’

“ ‘Oh, anything we happen to find’; he was n’t going to find out any more from me until I knew more of him. ‘What are *you* doing here? Are you one of Mr. Whitehouse’s men?’ You see, Fat, I thought he might be one of the boundary men.

“ ‘Um-m,’ he sort of grunted, and I could see that he was n’t what I thought. ‘No, not exactly. In fact I have n’t the pleasure of knowing the gentleman you mention. I’m here doing work somewhat similar to yours. I’m collecting—for the Union Museum.’

“ ‘You can just bet the scales fell from my eyes then, Fat, and I stuck out my hand and said: ‘Why, I’m glad to know you, Mr.—Mr.—’

“ ‘Parker—Frank C. Parker, at your service, and your name is—’

“ ‘Milton—Frederick A. Milton,’ I replied, just as formal as he. ‘We’re two birds of a feather, it seems.’ Then, just to kid him along a bit, ‘Have you seen any parrakeets?’

“ ‘Whoopee, Fat! Parker started back at that question just as if I’d asked him for a

million dollars, and his face assumed a blank expression funny to see. 'Why, no!' he exclaimed, though it was easy to detect the falseness in his amazement. 'What could have put that idea into your head? Carolina parakeets are extinct.' Then, with pretended innocence, 'Have you seen any?'

"So comical was the look he gave me that I could n't help bursting out laughing. Dr. Keene told us before leaving New York that the Union Museum was sending a man to look for the birds in question, and beyond a doubt Mr. Parker was the man. His make-believe innocence did n't deceive me for one second. Beyond a doubt he knew all about us beforehand just as we did him.

" 'Why don't you admit it?' I laughed. 'You're down here after the parrakeets just the same as we are. There ought to be no secrets between brother scientists. We're going to beat you to those birds if we can, and you're going to do the same to us if you are lucky enough to find them first.'

"Parker allowed a feeble smile to play across his ugly bearded face. He nodded

and chuckled weakly. 'You're right, Milton,' he admitted. 'It's a race to see who gets there first.'

" 'Now let me ask a question,' I said. 'Have *you* seen them?'

"A look of cunning crept into his eyes, and he answered with a shake of his head. 'But I believe I know where they are to be found,' he declared; and even then I could tell that he was lying."

Paul interrupted his chum at this juncture with a laugh. He had been listening to the tale with deep interest, but now his round face was wreathed in smiles.

"The man evidently did n't make a good impression on you, Skinny, did he?"

Fred decisively shook his head. "He sure did not!" he retorted. "For one thing, he had followed me all the way from the lagoon without trying to catch up, and, for the rest—well, you wait until I'm finished, and you'll agree with me."

CHAPTER XIV

EXPLORING THE FOREST

“**W**HEN he said that he knew where the parrakeets were to be found,” Fred continued his story, “I knew he was not telling the truth. But I made believe that I believed him and looked kind of crestfallen.

“‘Yes, sir,’ Parker repeated, ‘I know where they can be found.’

“‘Where?’ I ventured in an eager voice.

“‘It’s likely I’d tell you!’

“‘Please, Mr. Parker,’ I replied.

“He seemed to think a moment as if turning some scheme over in his mind and then said: ‘All right, I’ll tell you where. I like to play the game square. Ten miles south of here is another strip of jungle very similar to this, and that is the home of the last living parrakeets. I have that fact on good authority and am on my way there now—just stopped

to explore this bit of forest on the way. I think it only fair that you should know about them; but believe me, boy, you'll have to hurry to get there ahead of me! I have a mule and wagon over on the high land a couple of miles to the south of this place and am bound toward it now.'

"'Gemini, that's tough luck for us!' I groaned. 'We're on foot; but, thanks ever so much, Mr. Parker, for letting us know. You've acted like a true sportsman, and it's only proper that you should have first whack. We'll probably start first thing in the morning, and if you have n't gotten them all by the time we reach there, we'll give you a race yet.'

"He seemed pleased at that and gave me minute directions how to get there. I wrote them out in my note-book, and then, with a parting hand-shake, we took leave of each other. We both hurried off into the woods as fast as our legs would carry us."

"Well, I must say that I don't see anything wrong with him so far," earnestly declared Paul when his chum had concluded. "He

sounds to me like a pretty good kind of sport. He told you where the parrakeets are to be found and seemed quite decent about it."

Noting the serious look on Paul's face, Fred lay back his head and broke into a hearty laugh. "Of course he did," he agreed, grinning. "That's just the point; he knows the parrakeets are here as well as we do and wants to get rid of us."

"I don't believe it." Fat shook his head.

"Here," continued Fred, with a chuckle; "I have n't quite finished. You remember the shots we heard this morning and the dead egrets?" At a nod from the other, he continued: "Well, listen to me. There was the tip end of an egret plume stickin' out from the front of his shirt all the time he talked to me! It must have slipped down when he fell, and he did n't notice it there; and, judging from the bulge in the shirt, there must have been a lot more!"

Fat slammed the fist of his right hand into the palm of his left. "Gummy!" he exploded, "I guess you *are* right! That's the limit! If he's the chap who shot those birds he must

be a pretty low kind of an individual. That's not the study of natural science; it's slaughter! Yes, you're right, Skinny!"

"And that's not all," the other quietly continued. "When I'd left him for about five minutes, I discovered that I'd dropped the tripod case. That caused me to retrace my steps exactly over the ground I'd just been. Parker was n't in sight—I kept careful watch for him—and neither was the tripod. No, he had n't stolen it. I found it close to the lagoon where it had dropped when I leaped behind the grape-vines the first time I heard him. But, besides that, I found something else.

"As I passed the spot where he tripped up that time, I noticed a piece of yellow paper, all crumpled up into a ball, lying on the ground where he'd fallen. I picked it up. Here, read it."

He handed his companion a wrinkled slip of paper, and Paul carefully spread it on his knee. He saw that it was a telegraph form covered with type-written characters. Having hastily read its contents, he uttered an in-

dignant growl and faced his chum with a raging countenance.

"So that's what happened!" he snapped, so indignant that he could hardly speak. "The thief!"

Fred nodded slowly. "You see now why I don't like him, Fat, don't you?"

"I sure do!" was the emphatic response. "Just let me catch him snoopin' around this camp, and I'll show him what's what!"

It was getting late in the afternoon when the boys ended their discussion of Frank C. Parker. As it was too late to think of returning to the jungle, they determined to explore the region about the camp. Although fearful that their rival from the Union Museum might, during their absence, secure the parakeets, there was nothing they could do to prevent him. If they crossed the meadow back to the forest, there would scarcely be an hour left of daylight in which to continue their hunt, and that was hardly worth while.

"As for the egrets," declared Paul, "I doubt very much if he'll bother them again while we're in the neighborhood. He knows very

well that if we should find him at it, his name would be mud back in New York. I've a great mind to tell him that we know about his shooting them, next time I see him."

As it was only four o'clock, the boys decided to work back through the woods and open glades in the direction from which they had arrived in the car. The island where the camp stood was scarcely two hundred yards across, and soon, following the wheel-tracks, the boys emerged into the meadow which cut it off from the mainland. Contrary in character to the marsh where fed the herons, this one was covered with short grass which grew from firm sandy soil submerged about six inches beneath the water. Consequently, the walking was good, and, still guided by the wheel-tracks, they hastened across the intervening half-mile which separated their island from what looked like a bit of mainland. The meadow was dotted with grazing cattle, but, despite previous experience, the boys paid these slight heed, and presently, without adventure, reached the farther shore.

Here the character of the forest was differ-

ent from that in which they had spent the major part of the day. Pines dominated, but were spread wide apart, with intervening patches of palmettos, which grew stunted from the barren white sand beneath. The ground, in places where the trees grew closer, was carpeted with pine-needles and scattered with cones. Here and there, mingled with the brown carpet and starving palmettos, were small clumps of coarse sedge-like grass on which browsed a scattering of thin cattle. It was not a fertile country, but a typical one, a portion of the great pine forest which covers a large part of the Florida peninsula.

The young naturalists wandered through this region for half an hour, deeply interested in the few birds and animals they saw, but disappointed in the general outlook of the place. Small, mosshung cypress swamps there were in abundance, set like oases in the desert of pines, but even these were bare of feathered life save for a few isolated herons. Of parrakeets there was no sign.

Presently the boys halted on the bank of a

narrow creek, scarcely ten feet wide, where there was a semblance of tropical growth.

"This looks better," growled Fat, who had been showing signs of disappointment at the hitherto barren display. "Suppose we follow it southward a short distance, Skinny, just to see if it fetches up anywhere near our island camp. There's no use keeping to this pine forest any longer."

The little stream grew no wider as they advanced along its bank, but it did not narrow. The water, brown coffee-color, seemed to be of good depth, as Paul unfortunately discovered when he attempted to ford it. Stepping off the bank, he had walked boldly in, and, for his pains, disappeared entirely from sight, gun and all. In a moment he had risen, spluttering and spitting, to the surface and was helped ashore by his grinning companion. Thereafter he took no further chances.

The stream was lined with live-oak and cypress. Few pines found their way to the banks. Tall cabbage-palmettos leaned over the water, their fronded heads almost meet-

ing, and the boys passed clump after clump of tall ferns. Numerous small bayous ran back from the banks, necessitating detours, but, as a whole, a few yards back from the stream the going was quite open.

"This looks pretty good," decided Paul, when they had covered a mile. "It's like a belt of tropical foliage growing in the midst of a desert. If there's any way of getting the canoe here, I'm going to explore this stream to-morrow. There are gumbo-limbos here as well as in the regular jungle we visited this morning, and I bet there are parrakeets, too."

"There may be," retorted his chum, "but I think I'll stick to the jungle. We *know* they're there."

Presently, to their surprise, the creek led them back to the open meadow that separated their island from the mainland. Its course across the open space was marked by a heavy growth of scrub palmettos, which they had noticed before but thought of no consequence. Following with their eyes the direction taken by these dwarf palms, they realized that the stream must flow close to the island and doubt-

less was connected with the slough on the other side. This supposition later proved correct. The slough was merely a back-water lagoon from the main stream.

It was dusk when they arrived back at camp and found there a wholly unexpected surprise awaiting them. A most unwelcome visitor was on hand to greet them.

CHAPTER XV

A TRIP BY CANOE

UPON approaching camp through the early twilight, the boys became aware of a figure standing motionless before the tent beneath the spreading live-oak. Who could it be? they wondered, surprised by the presence of this late visitor.

"I bet it's old Red Whiskers," Paul whispered to his chum; that was the disrespectful name by which they had already dubbed Mr. Parker. "He's just come snoopin' around while we were away to see what he could find. Come on, Skinny, let's tell him a few things about himself!"

"Hold on, Fat," the other cautioned, seizing Paul by the arm. "That's not Red; it does n't look like the man at all to me."

They hastened forward, and, arriving at a point that afforded a clearer view of the in-

truder, stopped by common consent with gasps of amazement. Fat threw an alarmed glance at his companion, and, with a grunt, flung himself behind a thick bush. Fred followed an instant later.

"It's a bear!" was his startled comment, and he crouched, trembling with excitement, beside his chum.

"It sure is!" agreed that stout individual. "But what I want to know is what's he doin' there, and what are we goin' to do about it?"

For several minutes they watched the unwelcome intruder. It was a small bear, measuring little more than three feet in length, and was almost black in color, but, still, it was a bear. It may be remembered that Paul had caught a fleeting glimpse of a similar animal earlier in the day, and this may have been the same beast.

It was an inquisitive bear, at any rate. Moving away from the tent where they first discovered it, it approached the remains of the camp-fire, sniffing as it advanced and nosing the ground. It paused on the way to pick up a biscuit, which it swallowed in one satis-

fied gulp. An empty bean-can afforded deep disappointment, vengeance for which was wreaked on half a rasher of bacon thoughtlessly left near the fire. Mollified by this titbit, after a further though futile search, it ambled back toward the tent and lay down in front of the open flap. The even sound of breathing soon told that it slept.

"Did you ever see anything to beat the nerve of that?" murmured Fat, in a lugubrious voice. "Listen to that chap snore, Skinny, will you? He's worse than you."

"That's all right," Fred retorted, "but how are we goin' to get rid of him? He acts as if he owns the place, and I, for one, am not sure that he does n't."

Both thoughtfully studied the situation. It was growing darker every minute and soon would be pitch-black night. Something must be done to drive away their visitor before it became too dark to see. Neither boy had any inclination to pass the night in the brush while the bear occupied their tent.

"Shall we shoot?" eagerly demanded Paul.

"At this distance we ought to wreck him with our guns."

"Nothing doing, Fat. Number Eight shot in a shot-gun is n't calculated to do much damage to a bear, even at this short range. If he was ten feet away perhaps it would take effect, but not otherwise. There's no use getting him mad by stinging him."

"Suppose I crawl up close and let him have it?" volunteered the stout boy. "I never did shoot a bear, and I'd like to take a crack at one now."

But Skinny shook his head, and, in a decisive tone, said, "You keep away from him, Fat. We're not on a bear-hunt; we're lookin' for a place to sleep. Besides, at this time of year that chap may have a family somewhere, and it would be rotten to break that up. People down here say that bears are harmless and scary, so I move we just charge at him yelling at the top of our lungs. If that does n't drive him away, then we can use the guns."

This plan was finally agreed upon, though

not without demur from the bloodthirsty Fat. "That skin would look good on the floor of our laboratory," he grumbled. "Still, I suppose you're right, Skinny, and, perhaps"—hopefully—"he won't run when we yell." Then in an assumed dolorous tone: "Yes he will—when he hears *you*. Either that or he'll go crazy and run amuck. Well, here goes."

Tightly clasping their weapons, both lads rose from their hiding-place and, with blood-curdling whoops, leaped toward the unfortunate bruin. The bear, awakened from pleasant dreams, looked up to see two yelling, screeching demons tearing down upon him from the brush that ringed the camp. On they came, brandishing their weapons and howling like a score of dervishes. No grizzly could stand that volume of outlandish sound, let alone a poor, insignificant Florida black bear. Without a second of hesitation he crawled to his feet and, with a grunt of anguish painful to hear, departed at a gallop off into the night. He would never venture near that camp again.

"Bah, that was too easy!" grumbled Fat,

coming to a halt and listening to the crashes, which rapidly grew fainter as the beast hastened to put miles between himself and that nightmare. The boy actually was disappointed that there had been no reason to shoot. Turning to Fred, he remarked dryly:

“Your plan worked, old Skinny Shanks. I reckon that fellow won’t stop until he reaches Jacksonville, three hundred miles from here. If you had only listened to reason, however, we would have had a bear-rug by this time.”

The night passed without further visitation, and at sunrise they continued the hunt. Fred decided to return to the jungle explored the day before, and Paul determined to travel up the creek in the canoe. Each lad was resolved to locate the birds that day.

“It’s absolutely necessary that we should,” declared Fred. “Red Whiskers is sure to, if we don’t, and he’ll probably shoot them right off the bat if he sees them. It’s up to us to get a photograph and to clear out as soon as possible.”

“It’s a shame we only have one camera,” said Paul. “Let’s match to see who takes it.”

"No," his friend was final on the subject. "You take it, Fat, in the canoe. Alone I could n't very well lug it around all morning. You take it and *use* it if you have a chance. In the mean time I 'll try on my own hook to locate the feeding-tree of the parrakeets, and if I 'm successful we can spend the afternoon in getting pictures of the birds. You 'll be back by noon?"

"You bet your sweet life I will! And if I get the chance I 'll have a picture, too! I have a hunch that I 'm going to see the birds this morning. I 'll ferry you across the slough and leave you to your own devices. Don't run afoul of Red Whiskers if you can help it."

"I 'll try not to treat him rough if I do," Fred grinned. "All right, Fat; let 's go. If there 's time, I 'm going to work westward toward the boundary-house and say how-do to the man there."

Upon the departure of his chum, Paul headed the canoe down the length of the slough. The pace was slow, because of the heavy growth of water-lilies and marsh-

grasses that luxuriated there, but in half an hour he had discovered the entrance to the creek. Then, instead of turning back in the direction they had come the evening before, he was the recipient of a "hunch," and headed the craft down-stream parallel to the tract of jungle toward which Fred was making.

After flowing due east for a mile the creek made a sharp turn to the right, and the boy saw that if it maintained its present course it would carry him to that same bit of forest. Highly pleased with this idea, he plied the paddle with energy, and the canoe sped forward. A few minutes later he was delighted to find himself speeding between two high walls of trees, which met overhead and shut out all hint of sunlight from the bed of the stream. He had entered the forest at a point farther to the eastward of the egret rookery than his chum had traveled on his explorations the previous day.

As it entered the jungle the stream narrowed until it was scarcely eight feet wide. But it was extraordinarily deep, and the current was imperceptible. On either side the

banks were lined with thick-growing trees of many varieties, all hung with streamers of Spanish moss and dotted with spine-leaved air-plants, the home, Paul knew, of numerous tiny tree-frogs and insects. Great branches, fringed with delicate, filmy resurrection-ferns, which curl up during periods of drought and unfurl their fronds at the return of moisture, hung low above his head, locking and interlocking with others from the opposite bank. A few orchids, gay but small, were imbedded among the ferns. Green and brown lizards sunned themselves on the branches in patches of filtered sunlight.

Numerous tree-trunks lay across the stream just as they had fallen from time to time, and offered serious obstacles to the advance of the canoe. Of necessity the boy's progress was slow, but he gradually won a way beneath the prostrate trunks until he was deep within the jungle.

The creek twisted and turned, and very nearly looped back on itself. Egrets and herons flew up with startled squawks from its swampy banks. A pair of wood-ducks, be-

lated on their spring journey north, splashed around a bend and, finding an opening through the canopy of branches, whirred off over the tree-tops. A bright yellow and black banded zebra butterfly darted uncertainly over his head and then flitted off into the heart of a tangle of lianas. A water-turkey, one of those long-necked uncanny darters, appeared close under the bank, swimming with its head above water and the rest of its body concealed beneath the surface. At sight of the canoe it paused a moment as if uncertain what to do; then in a swirl of water it disappeared, to come up again a hundred yards astern, having swum beneath the craft.

At last Paul reached a barrier that effectually stopped progress. A gigantic live-oak had toppled across the creek in such a manner that its head had fallen fairly in midstream. The entire waterway, from bank to bank and for twenty yards down-stream, was filled with a network of branches which, while they permitted the flow of water, forbade the passage of all else. Without an ax the boy was helpless to proceed. Unless he could successfully

portage the canoe, the journey by water was at an end.

Much dismayed, Paul drove the bow of the little craft into the bank and disembarked. The shore at that point was low, but firm underfoot, and, dragging the bow out of water to make certain that the canoe would not drift away, Paul set out to discover a path around the fallen forest monarch over which he could drag it.

But in this he was doomed to disappointment. The forest at that point was impenetrable for such a bulky object as a canoe. Without a machete it would be an impossibility to clear a way through the matting of vines, sharp-thorned brambles, and saplings which choked the spaces between the close-growing tree-trunks. The opposite shore of the creek was in the same condition.

The boy, with a murmur of disgust, prepared to turn back. It seemed that his voyage in that direction was over. He forced his way back to the canoe.

But, not discouraged, Paul determined to paddle back a short distance and, arriving at

a more inviting spot, to leave the craft while he spent a short time exploring on foot.

As his hand touched the bow of the boat preparatory to embarking, his keen ears caught a rustle of leaves overhead, and, looking up, he observed a movement among the branches of a small tree overhanging the canoe. Paying slight heed to the sound, he had just placed a foot in the craft when a dull thump came to his ears, as if something soft and heavy had landed in its bottom. A glance sufficed to show what had occurred and, uttering a startled yell, he sprang back out of harm's way. A snake had dropped from the tree into the canoe.

We all know that Paul's aversion to snakes was real and not affected. Therefore, it is not surprising that his retreat from the boat was more hasty than his approach to it. He bounded into the bushes and put a safe ten feet between himself and the new-comer. Assured of his safety, he watched the serpent while it crawled slowly toward the center of the craft and coiled up near the camera that reposed there.

Here was a new and unlooked-for complication, and Paul then and there decided that this spot was the ideal one for leaving the canoe to begin the journey into the jungle. From the appearance of the serpent, it was there to stay, and he had not the slightest inclination to disturb it. If it desired that canoe as a bed it was welcome so far as he was concerned. Perhaps in an hour or so it would decide upon a change of quarters, though at present its desires seemed inclined in the opposite direction. At any rate, he would give it time to do whatever it wished. One look at that evil triangular head was sufficient to acquaint him with the venomous character of the reptile, and he had no inborn wish to examine too closely a water-moccasin.

Had he been his chum he might have acted in a different manner, but Paul was not Skinny and he had no morbid curiosity of that kind. He left the snake and departed into the forest, cautiously parting the bushes and examining each foot of ground for further reptiles as he advanced.

CHAPTER XVI

THE PARRAKEETS

HAVING torn a way through the tangle that lined the creek, Paul reached the more open forest and continued a cautious advance. His eyes eagerly sought out the trees that bore ripened fruit, all of which underwent a piercing scrutiny. His ears were sharpened to catch the faintest sound that would imply the presence of a parrakeet.

A hundred yards were covered in this manner before his steps were suddenly arrested. This time it was not the rustle of a snake; no cold shivers ran down his spine. Instead his face became suffused with excitement, and his heart pounded like a bass drum. A faint sound issued from the top of a fifty-foot tree standing on high ground a few yards ahead of him. He drew a sharp breath.

Could it be, he wondered, that he had found them? The *bois-fidèle*, incorrectly named the fiddlewood-tree, to which the sounds were traceable, stood away from its neighbors in a small opening of the forest. He recognized it by its narrow, pointed leaves and strips of small dark fruit, which looked, at that distance, for all the world like clusters of ordinary, hedgerow-variety choke-cherries. And among these clusters he thought he discerned a slight movement.

Stepping as stealthily as he was able, Paul crept slowly forward, taking advantage of every bit of cover that served to shield his movements from the tree. The little commotion in its upper branches had ceased. The *bois-fidèle* seemed as empty of feathered life as any other tree in the forest. Not a leaf quivered; not a berry dropped to the ground.

From past experience in the tropics the boy knew exactly what had occurred. The parakeets, if they were actually there, had become aware of his presence. Their feeding had stopped, and, silent as graven images, they

were staring in his direction. The green of their bodies blended exactly with the green of the foliage, and until they moved it would be impossible to decipher their outline.

Paul, veteran that he was, stood stock-still and watched. Presently, when they had become used to his presence, the birds would again begin feeding. Of this he was assured a few minutes later when his sharp eyes caught a second movement in the tree far up near the top. A few berries rattled upon the dead leaves below, and a low *klee-klee* reached his ears. There arose a fluttering among the pointed leaves, and a bird, scarcely as large as a mourning-dove, darted forth. For an instant it hovered in mid-air before merging again into the tree. The performance was repeated, and then, with a chorus of harsh *klee-klees*, five parrakeets left the *bois-fidèle* and flew off over the jungle-top.

Paul trembled all over with excitement; his gun very nearly dropped from his fingers. Instead, however, of appearing downcast at the sudden departure of the birds, he seemed

almost pleased, and a grin spread over his features. Past experience told him that the parrakeets would shortly return.

And he was right. Five minutes later, having circled above the forest in a series of short, erratic dashes, the birds settled back in the *bois-fidèle*.

There were five of them! Paul could have hugged himself. Five parrakeets waiting for their picture to be taken! A bird for every thousand dollars of reward! It will be admitted, however, that the boy did not think long of the money. His instincts as a naturalist were aroused. The reward sank into insignificance at the thought that he, a naturalist, had seen a living, screeching, flying, Carolina parrakeet! All that remained to be done now was to set up the camera and snap the birds as they fluttered, feeding, about the tree.

The camera? Paul's heart sank with a distinct thud into the depths of his shoes. A water-moccasin was coiled in the canoe beside the camera!

Setting his jaw, the boy turned back into

the forest toward the craft. Snake or no snake, he was going to have a picture of those birds. The reptile must be ousted, and ousted quickly!

A short while later he stood beside the canoe and peered cautiously into it. Yes, there was the camera and—the cottonmouth, twisted into a heap near it, apparently asleep. What was he to do now? The mere sight of the hideous reptile aroused within him a revulsion of feeling.

Paul shrugged his shoulders and compressed his lips. He refused to allow his mind to dwell on the possibilities of that ugly creature. He deliberated upon the best means of getting rid of it. There was his gun, and it would be a simple matter to blow the intruder to smithereens, but to the destruction of both canoe and camera. He shook his head. The moccasin must be frightened away; that was the only way out of the dilemma.

Arming himself with a stout club fashioned from a dead branch, and nerving himself for the fray, Fat returned to the vessel. In the

other hand he held a long switch with which to arouse the serpent. His gun, after a long mental struggle, he had decided to leave in the bushes.

Paul stood on the bank above the canoe. Taking a deep breath, he hazarded a soft thrust with the switch at the cottonmouth.

The snake, painfully aroused from a deep slumber by a prod from the stick, struck out savagely without thought, as all snakes do by instinct. It reared up until it seemed that it would balance erect on its tail, and then, with a frightened hiss, terrified at the sudden intrusion into its slumbers, it literally sprang over the gunwale into the creek. The brown water closed over it and hid it from sight.

At the sudden movement of the snake, Paul staggered back up the bank, startled beyond expression. Then, overcome by weakness, he sat down with a grunt. Presently he burst into a laugh at himself for his fears. The cottonmouth had proved a greater coward than he.

It took but a short while to reach the *bois-*

fidèle with the camera. Using extreme care, the boy focused it on the tree. The tripod was hidden by a growth of vines, and only the bright eye of the lens could be seen by the parakeets. The birds paid slight attention to the photographer beyond remaining silent until his preparations were completed. Thereafter they commenced feeding noisily as before, causing the little dark berries to shower in a ceaseless patter on the ground.

Paul stood beside the camera and waited. A mere photograph of the tree would show nothing, so intimately did the birds and foliage blend in color. He must exercise patience. They must be caught by a fast snapshot when they left the *bois-fidèle* on one of their short periodic flights.

This he presently succeeded in doing, not once, but several times, and felt duly elated in consequence. And then, to cap the climax, a view was obtained of a single bird which had sidled out upon the tiptop twig, where grew some strings of luscious berries. It was outlined dark against the bright blue sky, but,

nevertheless, Paul knew that an enlargement of the photograph would show more than a black silhouette.

Scarcely believing in his good fortune, the boy folded up the camera and tripod. He placed the used plate-holders in their case and drew a deep breath of thanksgiving. The object of the expedition was accomplished. If the negatives proved good, as he had excellent reason to believe they would, Fred and he would hurry them off to the museum by post at the earliest opportunity, and their case would be proved before the United Ornithological Societies. It but remained to develop the plates as soon as night fell, and on the morrow Jeff Down would call for the hunters in the car. Fred and he were close to the prize now. They had beaten Mr. Parker and the Union Museum. By luck and diligent search they had stumbled on the parakeets within four days of their arrival in Florida.

Paul was exultant. He had accomplished what the ornithological societies had thought the impossible. Old Red Whiskers had

fallen out of the running. He was defeated, and all his—

The boy suddenly came back to earth. Some one advanced through the forest in his direction. He could hear the crunch of leaves underfoot and the scrape of twigs against cloth. An instant later the bushes parted, and Mr. Parker, the very man he had been thinking of, stood before him.

For a moment Paul stared at the new-comer in profound amazement not unmingled with perturbation. What was the man doing there? and the parrakeets feeding above them in the tree! Groaning inwardly at the inopportune arrival, Paul forced a smile to his face and greeted his rival.

“Any luck?” he inquired.

Parker glanced suspiciously at the camera and back at Fat. The parrakeets, made wary by this new visitation to their feeding-grounds, perched silent and apparently unobserved by the intruder.

“I suppose you ’re young Jenkins,” said the man, permitting Paul’s question to remain unanswered. “I am Parker of the Union

Museum, as your friend has doubtless informed you. I thought you chaps were going to move farther south to-day."

"We were," Paul returned, thinking rapidly, and inwardly offering a fervent prayer that the parrakeets might maintain their quiet. "We were, and then at the last moment changed our minds. We thought *you*, also, were going."

Parker's gray eyes sparkled, and his beard hid a satirical smile. "So I was," he said, "but I, too, altered my mind. I see you have a camera; been taking pictures?"

"Oh, a few," was the careless response. How Paul inwardly quivered. He must get Parker away from there! "Nothing to amount to much," he continued, "I was just returning to the canoe when you came along. Would you care to come with me?"

"Canoe?" The man was openly astonished. "Is there a river near here?"

"A small creek; that's all. It runs by our camp, and I took advantage of it this morning to reach the forest." Paul cast a fearful glance at the *bois-fidèle*, from which his ear



For a moment Paul stared at the newcomer in amazement

had detected a faint rustle, and, raising his voice, he continued loudly: "We'd be very glad if you will lunch with us, Mr. Parker. It's a short way in the canoe, and we can reach camp in less than an hour. Let's hurry; don't you want to?"

Parker hesitated a moment and then nodded. The boy stooped down to pick up the camera. As he did so, while his eyes were turned in the opposite direction, the man threw a cunning glance at the berry-tree; but he said nothing and followed, while Paul blithely led the way toward the creek.

Fat was happy. He had succeeded in leading his rival away from the vicinity before the parrakeets resumed their feeding and chattering, as they were likely to do at any moment, and he felt that the day was saved. Parker, in apparent ignorance of how near he had been to the birds, followed close at his heels.

CHAPTER XVII

A DREADFUL DISCOVERY

THEY had left the neighborhood of the *bois-fidèle*. Paul was beginning to breathe freely, when of a sudden Parker and he were startled by the sound of two shots coming from near the spot they had just left. Following the reports came terrified cries from the parrakeets, and the entire five flew, screeching, close to the tree-tops over the hunters' heads. In his consternation Paul nearly dropped both gun and camera.

"Good Lord, there they go!" he groaned, voicing his confusion aloud.

"Why, they are parrakeets!" cried Parker, in assumed astonishment. "Good heavens, boy, they must have been feeding close to where I met you!"

"S-so t-they must!" Paul tried hard to appear surprised, and succeeded but poorly. "S-shall we go after them?"

"It's too late now," declared his companion, ruefully shaking his head. "They've—"

Parker's words were cut short by a third shot. "Who can be doing all the firing?" he demanded in an irritated tone. "Whoever it is ought to be locked up."

Paul did not answer. He was listening.

"Halloo," he called. "Who are you?"

"Is that you, Fat?" came an answering shout. "It's me! Come back here; I need some help, quick!"

Skinny was in trouble.

With a word to his companion to follow, Paul, not losing a second, dropped his photographic outfit, and, thrusting his gun into a position of readiness, hastened in the direction of the calls. The forest there was quite open and, despite having to dodge around several fallen trees and hummocks of vines, he made good time. Fred repeated his cries, and in less than a minute after he had heard the last shot Paul stood beside his chum.

"What's the matter, Skinny?" he gasped, breathing hard and gazing around for the victim of Fred's shots. "What happened?"

So far as he could see, nothing extraordinary had occurred. His chum stood unharmed, and the forest appeared deserted except for the boys. No beast lay bleeding on the ground.

But Fred hastened to put him right. "See those bushes?" he said, indicating a thick mass of shrubbery. "Well, it's in there!"

"What?"

"I don't know for sure—some kind of cat. I had a few shots and think it's crippled. At any rate, it's hidden there."

"Well let's finish it," panted Fat in a relieved voice, advancing toward the clump. Reaching the bushes he began to thrash around with his gun held at arm's-length by the stock, evidently in the hope of arousing the creature by the noise. With an exclamation of alarm due to a more varied experience with such wounded cats, Fred ran after him, and, seizing his chum, dragged him back.

"Are you crazy, man?" he expostulated. "You ought to have more sense, Fat, than that! You know as well as I do that a cor-

nered cat is about as bad a proposition as a person wants to buck up against."

"But it's only a wildcat."

"Wildcat nothing! And even if it was it would be mighty dangerous when hurt. It looked more like a puma!"

"Huh? what did you say? There are n't any pumas in Florida. They're found—"

"Hi, *look out!*" cried Fred, throwing his weapon to his shoulder and firing both barrels as fast as his finger could work the triggers. Paul had a vision of a huge, tawny body hurling from the brush straight for him.

Even as the beast sprang, while it was still in the air, the fat boy fired from his hip and, quick as thought, flung himself flat on his face. The body passed over and fell with a thud just clear of him.

Paul lay where he was, afraid to move a muscle, expecting momentarily to feel a pair of great clawed feet tear at his exposed back. Ten seconds passed—ten minutes they seemed to the boy—and nothing happened.

Fred tugged feverishly at his pocket and succeeded in releasing two more cartridges,

which he thrust into his gun. Then, rushing up to the prostrate beast, he placed the muzzle against its head. There was no need to fire; the great creature was dead. One of their shots, his or Paul's, had done the work; a full charge of shot had smashed into the brain of the cat.

Satisfied that the creature could do no further harm, Fred next turned attention to his chum. Kneeling beside him, half fearful of what he might discover, he grasped him gently by the shoulder. "Are you hurt?" he asked, almost afraid to put the question.

At the touch of his chum, Paul, thinking it was the cat, shivered; but, upon hearing the other speak, he raised himself to a sitting position. "Gemini, I thought you were that chap comin' to finish me! No, I'm not hurt. He never touched me, but, let me tell you, he came mighty near it! Where is he?"

Fred pointed to the dark body lying just beyond them and, thus assured, Fat rose shakily to his feet. It took nearly a minute to recover himself, and then he turned to his companion and in a husky voice said:

"I guess you saved me that time, Skinny. I reckon I'll pay attention to you next time." His memory drifted back to a similar occasion in South America when Skinny had rescued him in much the same manner. A wry smile spread over his grimy, perspiring face, and he muttered ruefully, "I'm afraid I never will learn."

The other boy waved a deprecating hand. "Of course you will. You saved yourself, Fat. It was your shot just as you went down that did the trick."

Together they examined the great cat. It was nearly twice the size of an ordinary wildcat and bore a long tail like a puma. But the body was more lithe in build, the legs thinner and more fine-cut. The ears were not tufted with hair as in a wildcat, nor were the flanks streaked and mottled. It was unicolor, but of a darker tawny hue than a mountain-lion.

"What would you call it?" finally demanded Paul, still at sea over the character of the beast, when he had completed his examination. "I never saw anything quite like it."

"Neither have I," acknowledged his chum, "but I know what it is. It's a panther, a Florida panther, now supposed to be practically extinct, and a close relative to the mountain-lion."

"This one *is* extinct," said Paul dryly; then, struck by a pleasing thought, "I guess it makes up for the bear we did n't shoot. But tell me, Skinny, how you happened to be in this part of the woods? I thought you were going the other way."

"I was," Fred grinned, "but something happened to take me in this direction. I was passing a patch of that curious holly whose leaves have n't any prickles like our regular Christmas stuff, when I saw a wild turkey stalk out of it, followed by about eight little young ones. They were about the cutest things I ever laid eyes on, little balls of fluff, brown and gray mottled, and hardly bigger than a minute. They could not have been more than a day old.

"The old mother hen seemed pleased to death, stalking back and forth, herding them along as fast as she could. Every few feet she stopped to cuddle them for a second or

two. She seemed in a hurry and yet was unwilling to move faster than the little beggars could travel.

"I wondered what had driven her out of the covert, and mighty soon found out. It was our friend lying there; all this happened not fifty yards from this spot. He sprang out of the holly square at the turkey.

"Now, you 'd think the turk would have run, but nothing doing. Instead, she just clucked to her young ones, which disappeared like magic beneath the leaves and under protecting logs. Turning toward the cat, the hen ruffled her feathers and prepared to fight to the end for her family. And it would have been the end for her, too, if I had n't taken pity and fired. Those chicks were too cute to be allowed to starve to death without a parent.

"I only had fine shot in the gun, but at that short distance it hit the panther hard. At any rate, the beast let out a howl and rushed over to that clump where you found him. That's all there was to it."

"But what was it that brought you in this

direction?" Paul demanded. "You said you were going to visit the boundary-house several miles over to the westward."

Fred chuckled. "I might ask you the same question," he retorted. "When last seen, you were headed down the slough in a canoe." An expression of anger replaced the smile on his face. "The reason why I came is simple enough. I found more dead egrets in the lagoon; that's all; and later in the morning I discovered Red Whiskers snooping around. I followed him."

At the mention of Parker, Paul gave a start. Until that instant he had forgotten the man. It suddenly came to him that Parker, after all, had not followed him to Fred's rescue.

"By Jove!" he cried, slapping his thigh in disgust. "I'd clean forgotten! Skinny, do you know what I've done this morning? I've taken the pictures of five parrakeets!"

He paused and gazed expectantly at his chum. Nor was he mistaken concerning the manner in which the latter would receive the information.

"You *have*?" shouted Fred. "Hurray, Fat,

you successful old porpoise! Great day, we're through then, finished! Parker's beaten! Great stuff, I say! But where's the camera?"

"Back in the woods. When I heard you call I dropped everything and rushed to your assistance. The chap you were following is back there with the stuff."

"Who? Parker? Heavens, Fat, he'll *steal* it!"

"He doesn't know about the parrakeets," Paul began, and then paused. He remembered that, at the sound of Fred's shots, the birds had noisily left the *bois-fidèle*, causing the forest to echo with their cries. Parker had heard them, and it was quite possible that he might draw conclusions concerning the camera. "Let's get back to where I left it," the stout boy said, uneasily. "I told Red Whiskers to follow, but he has n't shown up."

Between them they managed to lift the body of the panther, and with it, though bending under the heavy weight, they made off toward the spot where Paul had left his rival and the photographing outfit. A few minutes

later they dropped their burden beside the camera, which lay where Paul had left it. Nothing was disturbed; the tripod and plate-holder case lay beside it. Parker, however, was gone, and nothing but echoes answered the calls of the boys.

"I wonder why he beat it like that?" muttered Paul, feeling disturbed despite himself. "I invited him back to camp for lunch, and now he sneaks off without a word of explanation."

"Parrakeets," grunted Fred; "he heard them and started out to find them."

"Right," his companion agreed. "That being the case, it behooves us to get back to camp with speed. There's no time to be lost, and I move that, instead of waiting for Jeff to call for us to-morrow, we pull out as soon as we get there and try to get back to Thrasher on foot. If Parker gets one of those birds, he'll make tracks for the train as fast as he can leg it."

As this was sound reasoning, the boys hastily picked up the camera and its outfit, and, once more heaving the great cat on their shoulders,

set out at full speed for the canoe. This was but a short distance away, and soon they were paddling for dear life up-stream.

During the journey, Paul regaled his chum with the story of how he had photographed the birds, and related his experience with the water-moccasin. Fred, in turn, spoke about the devastated egret rookery.

"Parker must have shot twenty more, at least," he said. "In one spot I found eight bodies alone piled up, and others were scattered all over the place. It's a crime that he'll suffer for when we get back to New York. He must have been shooting all yesterday afternoon while we were away in the pine-woods out of sound of his shots. He's a bold chap! I was examining some of the bodies when I caught sight of him sneaking along one of the banks of the lagoon. He must have seen me at the same time, for he turned back into the woods. I started to follow with the idea of trailing him back to his camp on the chance of being able to spirit the plumes away. Just before I met up with the turkey and panther he halted and seemed to

be watching something, but what I could n't make out. Then he started ahead again; but after that I was occupied with the cat."

"Humph," observed Paul, now decidedly disturbed. "I wonder if he was watching me? But if that was the case, why did n't he just sally in and shoot one of the birds? That 's what he 'd most likely do if he got the chance."

Upon reaching camp, they at once began preparations for the long hike, which would last all the afternoon and part of the night. Paul warmed some beans over the fire, while Fred began to skin the panther. As this was a slow job, lunch was ready long before the skin had been entirely removed from the carcass. When at length this arduous duty was performed, the boys consumed their meal in a hurry and were ready to depart. The sun had reached its zenith, and there was no time to be lost.

As Fred, his hunger satisfied, rose from the camp-fire, he accidentally struck against the plate-holder case and sent it rolling over on

its side. With an exclamation of annoyance at his blundering, he righted it.

"Gemini," he cried, stooping to examine the case, "if I don't look out, I'll smash those things! No harm done this time, though!"

"No," agreed Paul, "I guess it didn't fall hard enough to damage its contents, but we've got to be mighty careful with them. They mean a lot to us. Hello, what's the matter?"

Fred had thrown back the cover of the black leather box to have a look at its contents. The sight that greeted him drew an exclamation from his lips in the form of a groan.

"What's the matter, Skinny?" again demanded Paul, alarmed at the sudden paleness of the other.

"Sand!"

"What do you mean?"

"Sand! The case is half full of sand! There are no plate-holders in it!"

To demonstrate his words, Fred turned the receptacle upside down, and a stream of white Florida sand trickled out. There was nothing else.

CHAPTER XVIII

ON THE TRAIL OF THE PLATES

“**M**AYBE he’s going to get away with them and maybe he is n’t!” savagely snapped Fred, when the two hunters had recovered from the panic that first followed the discovery of their loss. “The scoundrel overshot himself once, and that was enough to finish him. Don’t forget we have this.”

He thrust a hand into his pocket and extracted the crumpled telegraph form picked up on the previous day. Paul took it from his chum and, unfolding it with due care, read the following aloud:

F. C. Parker, Hatchet, Florida.

Secured part fresh skin parrakeet from collection brought by revenue officers to museum. Holding for you as ordered.

[Signed] PARTRIDGE.

Paul stuffed the form into his pocket and turned to Fred with the first smile that had crossed his face in half an hour. "I reckon you 're right, Skinny; we have it on him. If he uses our plates we'll use this telegram; we'll use it anyway when we get back. It ought to stop any further tricks of his. But who is Partridge?"

"Don't you know?"

Paul shook his head.

"There 's an attendant at the museum—belongs in Dr. Keene's office—by that name," said Fred. "He must be—"

The other interrupted with a grunt. "Huh! of course he's the man! Don't you remember? He was the chap who came into the laboratory that time to tell us that Dr. Keene wanted us. The parrakeet skin was lying right before his eyes, and I thought at the time that he appeared mightily interested in it. You can bet on it, he's the man! He is the only Partridge in the museum that is n't stuffed and in a glass case."

"There 's no doubt about it, Fat," his chum agreed. "He probably got a big sum for do-

ing it. Well, it's the last time he'll try anything of that sort. But now let's get back to the present. We've got to get those plates back."

"You can just bet your neck we have!" Paul declared bitterly. "And, what's more, we've got to get busy about it right now!"

"Let's see," murmured the other, thinking deeply. "Red Whiskers' headquarters evidently are at Hatchet, the place mentioned in the telegram. We passed Hatchet some twenty or thirty miles before reaching Prosperity. It can't be so many miles from here and is off to the westward, for we are east of the railroad; of that we're positive."

Paul agreed with a nod, and earnestly added: "Yes, and old Whiskers will make straight for it. He's on his way there now."

"Then," Fred announced with decision, "we've got to intercept him."

He rose and entered the tent, returning in a few moments with a time-table of the local railroad. On its back was a rough map of the region, the line of the railroad being

marked by a crooked black streak across the white surface.

"Here 's Hatchet," said Skinny, pointing to a spot on the map, "and here is about where we are. See, it can't be more than ten miles in a straight line, and the railroad swings to bring it almost due south of us. The son of a gun!" he remarked bitterly. "If we 'd followed his directions about reaching that patch of jungle where he 'd been informed that parrakeets were to be found, we would have landed right in the town! That *would* have been a jolt!"

"It is fortunate we did n't take his advice," was the dry acknowledgment. "As far as I can make out from this map, the shortest way to Hatchet is straight through the woods by the egret lagoon until we hit the railroad track. Let 's get going. There 's not a second more to be lost."

"How about stopping at the boundary-house and borrowing a horse?"

"Nothing doing. We don't know exactly where the house is, and we 're not sure that

the man there has any horses handy. We have n't the time to find out. Come on."

Thus, instead of heading toward Thrasher as had been the original intention, they turned in exactly the opposite direction and, having crossed the slough, soon were plunging through the meadow that separated them from the forest. Dozens of herons flew up, startled into sudden, graceful flight at their approach, but the boys vouchsafed these not a casual glance. Before the subtropical forest had been reached, Paul stumbled on the nest of a boat-tailed grackle in which reposed three small, heavily marked eggs, but, instead of pausing to admire, both lads, without a thought, passed it by. A rare sand-hill crane drove by on stately beating wings and went unnoticed. A large black snake wriggled into the grass almost from beneath his feet, and Paul did not even shudder.

Arriving at the edge of the jungle, they paused an instant for breath and then struck into the brush. A flock of quail greeted their entrance to the covert with a thunderous roar of wings and scattered to the four winds. A

great red-crested woodpecker called hoarsely from the topmost branch of a moss-hung cypress and departed with loud flutter and uneven, undulating flight to a spot that boasted of fewer hurrying human beings. A wildcat, hidden safely behind a tuft of tall feathery ferns, glared at them with fierce yellow eyes until they passed from sight. A stray half-dozen steers, grazing on the meager herbage, lifted startled heads and, turning, fled blindly into the bush. And, behind them, all unseen by the unsuspecting boys, stalked a dark, dog-like form which, consumed with true canine curiosity, ever kept them within its vision.

Fred and Paul paused again at the lagoon, drawn by a morbid curiosity to gaze at the heap of dead and mutilated egrets that Fred pointed out. Then, with tightened lips, they pressed forward.

"He just about finished that rookery," panted Paul, as they floundered ahead. "We 'll get him for that if we have to follow clear to New York."

Fred silently acknowledged this, and they

climbed the boundary fence. Once past this, the territory was new to them, and, in consequence, their advance was slower. Unknown swamps and hummocks beset the way and necessitated numerous detours. Progress in the direction of Hatchet grew slow and presently came to an absolute stop. A second slough, similar to the one near camp, ran east and west directly across their path. Although a network of aqueous weeds covered the surface, it was deep, treacherous, and impassable.

"It's all over but the shouting," groaned Paul, casting a despairing glance up and down the unwelcome barrier for a possible fording-place. "Old Whiskers knows the way around this, and we don't. He's got us stopped, Skinny."

"No, he has n't." The other refused to admit defeat; determination was writ strong across his face. "He's either gone around the slough or taken a path that led in another direction."

"No, he has n't," Paul, in turn, dolefully contradicted. He pointed across the weedy

stretch of water. "He crossed over in a boat; see its stern stickin' out from the bushes on the other side?"

Fred followed the direction of his chum's finger and saw the square end of a small bateau projecting from beneath the branches of a live-oak that hung over the slough. All doubt that this was the conveyance used by Parker was removed when, fifty feet farther along the bank on which they stood, Paul discovered the imprint of the man's tracks in the soft ooze that bordered the slough and the very log to which the boat had been tied.

"That settles it!" It was now Fred's turn to lament. "We 're finished!"

But, as the spirits of the other ebbed, Paul recovered his confidence in proportion. Parker had not yet escaped them. There must be an end to the slough somewhere, and they must find it. No train going toward Fort Myers passed through Hatchet until early the next morning, and if it was humanly possible they would reach that town before then. What they would do when they found Parker he was not so certain.

"Buck up, old Skinny Shanks," he encouraged. "All we've got to do is to strike west until we come to the railroad track and then follow it into town. It means only a few miles out of the way. I wish, after all, we had gone for those horses. But it's too late now. We've got to do the best we can."

"And in the mean time have him escape us," said Fred bitterly.

"Don't worry, old scout, he can't leave before daylight, and we'll be there long before that time."

"Maybe so; perhaps we'll get those plates back yet!" Fred was regaining his spirits.

"I have a hunch that the slough isn't so long," continued Paul. "We'll save time by going around it instead of walking five or six miles to the track. That we can leave as a last resource in case night overtakes us. It ought to be easy to follow the rails in that event."

"Right you are, Fat," agreed the other, finally beginning to look cheerful. "It doesn't make so much difference, after all, if we can't catch Red Whiskers before he

reaches Hatchet. Suppose you scout east, and I 'll follow the west bank. I 'm willing to bet this slough is n't over a mile long. If one of us can get around to the bateau he can wait there until the other either meets him or returns to this spot.

"Let 's both go west," urged Paul sensibly. "Then, if the slough does n't end, we can continue on to the railroad without delay."

As this was good common sense, without further loss of time, having recovered their breath, they turned westward along the northern bank.

CHAPTER XIX

THE ACCIDENT

THE growth along the edge of the slough was dense, composed of thick gnarled bushes armed with half-inch thorns, and, where the sun beat strongest, of tall bamboo-like briers that knit the brush together into an impenetrable mat and sent their thin, snaky tendrils to the tops of the tallest trees.

The ground underfoot was soft and mucky, and at every step the boys sank in ankle-deep.

Impatient and somewhat tired by a few rods of soggy trudging, they were forced to give up the plan of following close to the edge, and therefore chose a parallel course about fifty feet back in the forest where the land was higher and the soil firm.

Half a mile was covered, and still the slough stretched on as far as they could see.

It appeared to be uniformly about one hundred yards wide and gave no evidence of a possible crossing, although the forest skirting it became more open. Glade followed glade. Many were matted with brown, sun-scorched grass and dotted with low palmetto clumps. In other glades the growth of verdure was sparse, and the sandy soil gleamed either white or rusty red in the rays of the already waning sun. There followed more stretches of jungle, a hummock or two, and a lone cypress swamp. Then an open watery meadow, and, after that, patches of sand. The slough lost its weedy character and assumed the look of a broad river.

The boys crossed a small knoll covered with pines and marked by innumerable little sandy mounds, thrown out by the small burrowing salamanders. Here, they paused to rest and allow the perspiration to dry on their streaming faces. And here, by the rarest good fortune, they stumbled on one of the little creatures which, for some wholly inconceivable reason, had left its tunnel home for a sojourn into the open air. If it had re-

mained quiet instead of attempting a hurried escape at their approach, the boys would have passed it by unnoticed, and the little rodent would not have been treated to a fright that probably lasted it the rest of its short life.

Fred first spied the tiny creature scurrying through the thin grass as fast as its short stubby legs would carry it, which, in reality, was not very fast. With a word to Paul, still breathing hard, he climbed to his feet and headed the salamander off from the small opening in the ground toward which it was pointed. The tiny beast whirled and faced its attacker with a fierce show of long rabbit-like teeth and a dauntless mien.

The little creature was scarcely ten inches long, but had it been ten times that size it could not have put up a braver front. In color a light cinnamon-brown, with whitish feet and a short, almost naked tail, it was the incarnation of fierceness. An inhabiter of burrows like a mole, the salamander seldom sees the light of day, but spends its life digging, feeding on tender roots, and sleeping.

When cornered, however, it is a sturdy little fighter.

This Paul quickly learned when he advanced his foot toward the animal in question. Instead of retreating as he had expected, the tiny bit of fur sprang toward the offending shoe, and, if the boy had been less agile, would have pierced the leather with its teeth and gashed the flesh within.

"Golly, he's a game little beggar!" the boy exclaimed in admiration, but drew back to a safer distance. "So that's the Florida gopher, is it, Skinny?"

"It sure is," replied the other, "but down here it's called the salamander. The gopher in Florida is a large land tortoise."

The stout lad nodded. "That's so, but these are the real gophers. Gemini, look at that chap dig!"

The salamander was burrowing for all it was worth. Having seized the opportunity while the boys talked, it already was half hidden when Paul returned his attention to it.

"Look at him dig!" he repeated, bending down, in his enthusiasm as a naturalist, for a

closer study of the operation. A shower of sand smote his face and filled his eyes and mouth, causing him to choke.

"Ho," chuckled Fred, "he can dig, Fat." Then soberly, with a returning thought to their quest: "Come on, Fat, we've more important business to attend to than watching that thing. When we get those plates back we can examine salamanders and all those varmints to our hearts' content. Have you got your wind back?"

But they had hardly, with renewed energy, traversed a hundred yards and were just about to leave the pine knoll to enter a patch of tropical-looking jungle when Fred, with a cry, stumbled and went down. Picking himself up with an exclamation of annoyance at his clumsiness, he took a step forward, and then, groaning, once more sat down.

"It's my ankle!" he muttered, and turned a dismayed countenance to his companion.

"You don't mean that?" was the alarmed rejoinder; if Fred should be laid up they would have to give up all chance of overtaking Parker. "It's not bad, Skinny, is it?"

Paul pleaded. "You can walk all right, can't you? Just sit there a minute and recover yourself. Here, take off your shoe and let me rub it. Pshaw, it's hardly swelled at all! You'll be all right in a few seconds. There ought to be a law in this State preventin' those turtle gophers from digging holes!"

Despite Paul's assertion to the contrary, the ankle *was* swollen, and the more he rubbed, the larger it seemed to grow. In a final effort to walk, Fred, gritting his teeth and leaning on the shoulder of his chum, attempted to rise and, succeeding, hobbled forward a few feet. That was the utmost he could do, and, his face pale and streaming with sweat, he was forced to sit down. It was of no use; he could not go on.

"That finishes me!" he groaned, more from the anguish of disappointment than physical pain. "You've got to go on alone, Fat, and get those plates."

"And leave you here by yourself?" was the indignant response. "Nothing doing!"

"But you've got to! Parker will get that reward if you don't."

"Let him! The plates can go hang for all I care!" Paul growled this assertion rather than spoke it. "I 'll stick here with you. If he produces those photographs in New York as his, we 'll produce the telegram from Partridge. That ought to spike his guns and make the U. O. S. sit up and take notice. Our word is as good as his."

Fred allowed a rueful smile to play across his face at this indignant outburst. He knew as well as his chum that the other's indifference to the fate of the plates was assumed for the occasion. Armed with photographs to prove his assertion, Parker would have a clear case before the United Ornithological Societies, despite all the boys could say.

"No, you don't, Fat," he retorted. "You 're going to start right away after Red Whiskers." Cutting short an emphatic denial that hovered on the lips of the other, he hastily continued: "I 'm going to camp right here. If you 'll drag a couple of those old fallen logs up where I can get my hands on them to make a fire, I 'll be O. K. until the morning. There 's enough dead wood within twenty

yards to last a week. If it rains I'm out of luck, that's all; but I reckon I can live through one wet night. Anyway, it is n't going to rain from the looks of the sky. I've enough water left in my canteen to last, and, as for food, well, I guess I won't starve to death in twenty-four hours. In the mean time, you've *got* to get those plates."

After a short but heated argument, the plan was agreed upon. In a few minutes Paul had dragged up sufficient fire-wood to last out the night. He was fortunate enough to shoot a half-grown rabbit that leaped from beneath a pile of fallen brush at his approach, and thus his friend's supper was assured.

The accident, the argument, and the preparation for camp had consumed another precious hour, and when Paul left his chum it was late afternoon. Already he was three hours behind his quarry and held scant hope of overtaking him before the settlement of Hatchet could be reached. And, beyond Hatchet, Paul had not the slightest idea of how to proceed.

To his great delight the slough suddenly

came to an abrupt end, and here the boy halted. The railroad could not be more than three miles to the west, and the town about eight miles down its tracks to the southwest. In a straight line Hatchet could not be more than six miles from where he stood. This was the problem: should he take the surer and longer way, or the shorter and more difficult? If night overtook him on the tracks it would be a simple matter to follow them, whereas, if it caught him in the bush, his case would be hopeless. Six miles of swamp and forest against three of bush and eight of railway track—and two hours of daylight! He chose the shorter course.

Having made up his mind, Paul turned and hastened ahead. The way was more open than it had been, and he rejoiced that he had chosen this route. Broad meadow followed broad meadow, many under water, but with a firm bottom to tread upon. He passed several jungle islands that stood out like dark green hills in a sea of ripening grain—in reality sun-dried meadow-grass; and presently

he encountered higher land forested with pines.

A hundred yards within this forested belt he came upon a narrow sand road, running due southwest in the direction he desired to go, and doubtless leading to Hatchet. With his mind considerably lightened by this stroke of good fortune, he was about to begin a hurried journey along the thoroughfare when the sound of creaking wheels and muffled hoof-beats reached his ears.

Following close upon the sound a vehicle rolled around a bend through the fast-gathering dusk, not forty yards distant. In it, holding the reins and alone, rode Parker half slouched down in the seat and whistling softly to himself as if his soul was unweighted by a care in the world. He was headed straight *away* from Hatchet.

CHAPTER XX

PARKER AND PAUL

POOOR Paul! The sight of his enemy held him speechless. He could only stare dumbly as the buckboard approached. Both he and Fred had forgotten that Parker had said he owned a mule and wagon. Apparently the man had calmly driven to town, mailed the plates, and now was returning to his camp.

But why, wondered the boy, should he return? Why had n't he remained in Hatchet and taken the train north in the morning? It was inexplicable, and Paul was puzzled. The Everglades now had no call for Parker.

"Why, it's you!" hailed the man, drawing up beside the motionless figure at the roadside. "What are *you* doing here so far from your camp? This is a pleasure, believe me. Want a lift?"

Scarcely knowing what he did, Paul nodded in a sullen fashion, and, without a word of greeting to Parker, climbed into the buckboard.

"What 's the matter?" the man demanded in a jovial voice, having clucked his mule into renewed action. "Anything happened? You seem kind of quiet. Tired from your walk?"

"No."

"How is your friend Milton? I heard him calling to you just before I left this morning. Nothing serious the matter, I trust? Is he all right?"

Paul nodded. He would not give Parker the satisfaction of knowing about Fred's recent accident.

"My, you are unresponsive!" smiled the man. "Tell me, what brought you 'way over here? Been to Hatchet for something? You must have made a vast amount of speed. The last time I saw you, not more than five or six hours ago, you were about ten miles from here and headed in another direction. What caused you to alter your plans?"

"You know well enough, Mr. Parker."

"I know? What have I got to do with this sudden trip?"

"What did you do with the plates?" Paul demanded, by way of answer.

"What plates?" was the astonished reply.

"Did you mail them?"

"Did I what? What are you talking about, Jenkins?"

Paul shrugged his shoulders. "Where are you going now?" he demanded.

"Back to my camp where I belong," Parker retorted. "Now tell me what you're hammering at? I can't make head nor tail of it."

"Oh, the photographic plates!" snorted the exasperated boy. "You know perfectly well what I mean! You took them out of their case back there in the forest and carried them away."

If Paul had expected a denial to this charge he was disappointed. Parker turned to face him in amazement. "Oh, those!" he exclaimed, as if suddenly enlightened. "Of course I did! They were mine, you know," he added coolly.



The sight of his enemy held him speechless

"Yours?" cried Paul, with so much force that his voice broke. "Yours? How can you possibly figure that out?"

Parker uttered a delighted laugh as if this was the best joke he had ever heard. "Of course they were mine," he crowed. "I saw those parrakeets first, before you ever came on the scene, and when you came along with the camera I merely permitted you to snap their pictures for me. The birds were mine by right of discovery, and, consequently, if pictures were taken without my permission, they also were mine, provided I could get them."

Paul gaped. He was too astounded at this amazing explanation to venture a reply. The unbelievable assurance of the man was so absurd that it left him well-nigh speechless. The parrakeets belonged to Parker by right of discovery! The plates were his because permission had not been asked for their taking! The out-and-out crook! The crazy man!

But all the boy could think to say for the moment was the hesitating question, "D-did you mail them?"

Parker stumbled over his reply, and Paul thought to detect a note of falsity there, as if he sought to cover up a blunder in his answer.

"Hum—of course I did."

Then the boy's wrath escaped its bounds. Looking the man square in the eyes, he said in a low, concentrated voice: "You did, did you? You think you are going to pass those pictures off as your own, don't you? Well, you 're not! You come down here under the guise of a collector to secure evidence concerning the living presence of Carolina parakeets, and what do you do? You turn loose on an egret rookery, nearly exterminate it, secure a small fortune in egret plumes, steal photographs of the parakeets you're sent after, and then try to palm yourself off on the world as a naturalist. Pah, you make me sick!"

"Here, hold hard there, boy!" sharply retorted the man, dropping the reins and facing his companion. "You use strong words. Now, tell me exactly what you are accusing me of?"

Paul pulled himself together with a jerk. He realized that his had been an undiplo-

matic explosion, one which only served to arouse the man's wrath and increase his enmity toward the boys. The present emergency called for coolness, a clear brain, the meeting of fire with fire. He forced a smile to his lips.

"I 'm afraid, Mr. Parker, I let myself go a little more than I should. But you 'll have to admit that you haven't treated us very well."

"Not well?" snapped the man. "How do you expect to be treated? Tell me what you mean about the egret plumes."

"You did shoot a few," the boy muttered in a placating tone.

"Of course I did! They 're for mounting in the museum."

Paul turned his face away to hide the sarcastic grin that curled the corners of his mouth. That was too much! Mounting in the museum! The plumes only, he supposed! The body of the bird and the remainder of its skin could rot in the marsh.

"Huh-huh," he grunted, not trusting himself to speak.

"Yes, mounting in the museum," Parker iterated in a virtuous tone. "The people up there want a pair for a small group."

Fat gulped and—said nothing.

"Did you see me shoot one?" the man cautiously inquired.

The boy shook his head. "No, sir, I did n't, but my chum thought he saw you with some plumes. Perhaps he was mistaken."

"Hum-mm—of course!" Parker chirped to his mule. "Get along there, Rastus." Turning to his companion, he said: "He *was* mistaken. You're wrong, my lad, in your judgment of me."

Paul clenched his hands and set his teeth to prevent the retort that rushed to his lips. Nor did he relish Parker's calling him "my lad."

"Perhaps I am mistaken," he managed to say, choking back his resentment, but that was as far as he could go. "Will you please stop the mule, Mr. Parker; I'm going to get out here. Here, let me out!"

"Of course, of course," soothed the other. "Whoa, Rastus; we'll let this fiery youngster

go if he wishes." Then earnestly to the boy, who already was half-way to the ground, "I assure you that there has been some mistake."

Once on the ground, Paul's temper again flew its bounds. "The revenue department will have to be made to believe that," he blurted. "Yes, and the ornithological societies!"

A mile had been covered during the conversation. The sun had entirely lost itself behind the trees, and twilight shadows filled the forest. Even while the boy dismounted and stood beside the buckboard the man on the seat became a mere shadowy outline. Night was closing in fast.

At Paul's mention of revenue officers, Parker gave a start that he hastily concealed by a show of catching the reins that had fallen across the dashboard. Bending down, he said in a low voice:

"I 'm sorry I can't seem to convince you that you 're wrong. There 's no use stirring up trouble at Washington, for it will lead to nothing—so far as I 'm concerned." At this point he also seemed to lose control of himself

and shouted: "As for the societies, do you think they would take the word of two boys against mine? Just try it and see! I'm going to develop those pl—I have just forwarded the plates as my own, and they will accept them as such; don't you forget it! Get up, Rastus."

"Just hold on a minute, Mr. Parker, before you go"; Paul spoke coolly. "There is something you overlooked concerning that. If you want to know what it is, ask your friend Partridge up in New York. He might send you another telegram."

For an instant Parker was at a loss for words; then, with an inarticulate roar, he stood up in the buckboard. "You young rascal!" he cried. "Did *you* find that?" and, without preliminary warning, he sprang into the road.

Paul was no match for Parker. His only chance was to run. Over fallen trunks and through brush he shot like an arrow. When the heavy breathing and mumbled curses of Parker became inaudible, Paul sank down on his hands and knees and began to scout back

toward the roadway to mislead his follower. However, Parker did not lose a great deal of time after he got completely off the track, and from behind a palmetto thicket, Paul saw him climb back into the buckboard and give his mule a nasty cut with the whip.

CHAPTER XXI

THE EGRET PLUMES

PAUL was not satisfied at the result of his encounter with Parker. He blamed himself for being too precipitate of speech, too prone to permit his feelings to gain the upper hand in dealing with a matter that called for keen, cool, unhampered judgment. As matters now stood, the plates were gone beyond recovery, and Parker was riding rough-shod over Fred and himself, well on the road toward proving his claim of first finding the parrakeets.

Upon second thought, Paul decided that after all there had been little more to be gained from the man aside from information concerning the fate of the plates. The plumes, however, must be destroyed, and he censured himself severely for not having discovered the location of his camp. The one chance left was to allow Parker to lead him to it.

His mind made up, the boy, without further loss of precious time, hurried back up the road, and, at a jog-trot, started to overtake the buckboard. Although several minutes had elapsed since its disappearance, he felt confident of coming within ear-shot before long. The road was deep with sand and Rastus, the mule, had seemed to prefer no other gait than a walk.

Paul maintained his pace until, fifteen minutes later, he was rewarded by hearing the creak of wheels up ahead. By that time he was almost breathless and was only too glad to slow down to the walk now necessary to keep the vehicle within hearing distance. Up to this point the road had continued within the pines, but soon the buckboard turned to the right, leaving the main thoroughfare to enter an expanse of half-inundated meadow.

The boy thanked his lucky stars that he had caught up with it in time, and, striking out through the open, followed as close as he dared in its wake without being seen or heard. The night on the meadow was clearer. The stars, unhindered by the trees, lighted the

region and enabled him to keep the buckboard in sight a hundred yards away.

It was a glorious evening. The heavens were a mass of dark purple closely studded with a blaze of diamonds unblotted by a single cloud. Scarce a breath of breeze stirred, but there was a refreshing coolness in the air. A chorus of peeping frogs swelled their throats and sang a continuous song of greeting to the wayfarers. Numerous small bats flitted their erratic courses over the grass on a hunt for insects. Night-herons gulped and chuckled, and alligators boomed and coughed from far-off swamps, while, from a near-by wooded island, came the plaintive, childlike cry of a wildcat.

But Paul did not pause to listen to the evening calls. His every sense was concentrated upon keeping that buckboard in sight. He gave little or no thought to the reptiles he might tread upon, to the mud-holes which in the semidarkness might engulf him, or to the possibility of getting lost. His mind was centered on the enemy ahead, and he followed.

An hour passed in this fashion. The land

grew higher and dryer, though still open. The trail became better defined, and the boy lost all fear of losing it. Low palmettos took the place of the meadow sedges. A scattering of trees appeared, and presently the vehicle drew to a halt.

Paul listened to the man climb down and saw a light spring from the ground. Parker evidently had kicked aside the embers of an old fire, and in the sudden glare the boy saw him toss on fresh wood. As the flames mounted they brought into relief the outline of a tent backed by a growth of low trees. The man busied himself with unhitching the mule, which he tied to a bush, and then returned to the fire.

Now that the end of his quest was reached, Paul was overtaken by the first real pangs of fatigue he had suffered. With an inward sigh of relief that the journey was over, he flung himself prostrate on the ground and relaxed tired muscles. For eight hours, ever since the discovery of the theft of the plates, he had been continuously on his feet, and, during that period, had covered about eighteen

miles through an overgrown country. It is no wonder, then, that his legs refused longer to bear his weight and that he lay, as weak as a baby, trying to regain his strength. —

For a full two hours he lay there, just outside the circle of light, watching and planning and regaining vigor. Parker cooked his supper in a frying-pan, and, after devouring it, sat beside the fire with a pipe in his mouth. He appeared to be deep in thought and several times grunted audibly to himself. Once he chuckled aloud as some thought struck him, and again he burst into a deep laugh. Then, as the night was drawing on, he piled two great logs on the fire and entered the tent.

Once inside the shelter, Paul saw him light a candle and thereafter was content to watch the dark silhouette against the canvas as it prepared for the night. As these preparations consisted merely of unrolling a blanket, the silhouette disappeared when Parker blew out the candle.

“Humph,” grunted the boy, disappointed at the turn developments had taken. “I was

hoping he would give me some indication of where the plumes are hid before he turned in. I guess it's up to me now to locate them."

Giving Parker another hour in which to enter a sound sleep and to allow the fire, which had blazed up on the addition of the fresh logs, to burn low, the boy rose stiffly from the ground and advanced with caution toward the camp. Stealthily as any puma, he edged toward the tent. At the door he paused to listen and, reassured by the deep, even breathing within, turned toward the fire.

Paul was careful not to place himself between the fire and the tent lest the sudden shutting off of the faint glare awaken its inmate. Keeping well to one side, he made a careful survey of his surroundings. Parker's gun leaned against the tent; a wooden case of canned food lay not far from the fire; and near it were several dirty sacks and a discarded horse-blanket. Save for an ax that stood driven into the head of a log, and a few cooking-utensils, this appeared to be the extent of the camp outfit.

The explorer crept over to the sacks and felt them over one by one. All were empty, and the horse-blanket covered nothing but bare soil. The plumes were not concealed there, nor, so far as he could ascertain, were they anywhere around the camp. Without a doubt Parker had taken the trouble to conceal them within the tent, lest some unwelcome prowler discover them in the afternoon during his absence.

Disheartened, the searcher moved over to the buckboard, and felt beneath the seat. The plumes were not there. They *must* be in the tent—and so was Parker. What chance was there of securing them with that man sleeping there? It was one thing to steal into the camp and search while its owner was asleep, and another to crawl into that tent and extract the plumes virtually from beneath the man's head. It was an impossibility; but he must have those feathers.

The boy drew out of the lessening circle of light and set his wits to work. Parker must be got out of there until he, Paul, could make a thorough search of the entire place. But

how was this to be accomplished? That was the question.

Suddenly a plan came to him. The mule, Rastus! If he possibly could inveigle him into making a clatter of some kind that would call the man from the tent for a few minutes, that would serve the purpose. But how could this ruse be worked with success? Rastus was old and lazy and over-gentle. It would require a deal of coaxing to arouse him to the proper pitch of frenzy.

The idea having taken root, however, the plan rapidly evolved. The mule was untethered from its log and stealthily led to the rickety old buckboard. A stout bush a few feet to one side served as a tie-post, to which Rastus was securely made fast. Paul then rolled the light vehicle sufficiently close to brush against the mule's hind quarters, and stood off to view his handiwork. He was now prepared to proceed with the noisy part.

"Steady on there, old mule," he whispered as Rastus sidled away from the wagon that crowded upon him. "Steady there, I say. You 're goin' to have some fun in a minute."

The beast flicked its long, preposterous ears and blinked quizzically at him in the darkness, doubtless inquiring in its own language, "What 's up?"

Paul left him not long in doubt. Rastus felt a hand placed on his flank and, despite himself, was pushed against the buckboard. This, he thought, was a funny proceeding, and strove to turn the other way, but the vehicle barred progress. The hand pushed harder. Rastus's hind quarters rested against a wheel, whose sharp tire dented his flesh. The sensation was anything but pleasant, and the mule attempted to back away, but the inexorable hand held him in place. Rastus began to grow angry. This was not fair treatment to a lone, inoffensive mule. Who was this person who persisted in pushing him against the wagon, and, anyway, what was the wagon doing there? Both the person and the wagon must be taught their proper places.

Rastus lunged at Paul with his off hind leg, missed him, and crashed into the spokes of the wheel. That was too much even for a mild mule to stand. Recovering himself, he

gathered his limbs beneath him and let drive full force at the innocent buckboard. The wheel caved, and the vehicle slipped over on its side square beneath those pounding hoofs; for Rastus, now fully aroused, was having more fun than he had had since he was a colt. The sound of combat was sufficient to arouse a deaf-and-dumb asylum, let alone a sleeping man less than thirty yards away. As for Paul, he disappeared into the darkness.

Parker awoke, as might be expected, with a start, and sprang to the door of his tent. For a few moments he could not gage the exact source of the clatter beyond sighting an ill-defined blur at the spot where the buckboard had been. But a joyful bray soon acquainted him with the root of the matter, and, uttering an exclamation of annoyance, he hastened over to extricate the mule.

Now was Paul's chance. No sooner had the man turned his back on the tent than the boy slipped in. Although it was quite dark in there, he had small difficulty in laying hands on what he sought. The plumes were encased in long paper packages and heaped

up in a corner of the tent. There were a dozen packages, and, from their bulky feeling, Paul knew that they must each contain the feathers of several birds.

With the packages tucked under his arm and a feeling that amounted to joy in his heart, the boy made a hurried exit, and his stout figure was blotted out by the night.

CHAPTER XXII

ADVENTURE WITH A WOLF

SHORTLY after sunrise Fred Milton was surprised by a shout close at hand. He looked up from the labor in which he was engrossed to see his chum approaching at a slow walk. With an answering shout, he hobbled down the slope to greet Paul.

"What luck?" he eagerly inquired, scanning the other with anxious eyes. "Did you get them?"

The other, his face pale and drawn with fatigue, shook his head, and, moving to the smoldering fire, deposited beside it several large packages wrapped with paper and one of smaller dimensions.

"Those 're for the fire," he growled, and then, dropping beside the packages and stretching out on the welcome pine-needles, he declared in a tired, hopeless voice as if his

life had been about finished: "He beat us. The plates were mailed before I caught him. Drove to town to do it, and I met him on the way back."

At this piece of bad news Fred uttered a disconsolate groan and sat down beside Paul. "Tell me about it; is there no chance in the world?" he commanded soberly.

"Not a particle! He sent them up to his museum, and the pictures will be produced in a few days before the U. O. S.; but in spite of that"—Paul smiled a wry smile—"Parker did n't pass what you might call a restful evening."

He then went on to detail his experiences and the success that had followed his ruse with the mule. "I used plenty of speed in getting away from his camp, you can believe me. After walking for half an hour I lay me down on a stretch of dry sand and tried to catch a few winks, knowing that he could n't find me at night, but it was no use; there were too many mosquitos and other insects around. At the first hint of dawn I was up, and, once I found my bearings, it did n't

take long to locate you. Gemini, I'm tired!"

The blow that had fallen was not entirely unexpected by Fred. He had hoped against hope that the plates might be recovered, but his inborn common sense had told him that the chances were ten to one against such an occurrence. An incident had happened during Paul's absence which, to him as a naturalist, had temporarily placed the possession of the plates in a position of insignificance. Therefore, instead of taking the blow hard, he merely commented on the exhausted condition of his chum.

"I should think you would be tired! Walking all yesterday afternoon and part of the night, and no sleep on top of that! At any rate, Fat, you did what you could toward getting the plates, and Red Whiskers won't be able to put the plumes on the market. We'll have to rest satisfied that we've balked at least one of his games. What are you going to do now?"

"I dunno; I want to sleep. How is the foot?"

"Fine! Swelling's gone down, and I can walk on it with little trouble."

"That's great," the other murmured in a drowsy voice. "It's rotten about the plates, but I'm afraid he's got us beat. What was that thing you were fooling with when I came up?"

Fred stood up, a happy grin on his face, and moved off a few yards. He dragged back to the fire the half-skinned body of a large, dark-haired animal to a position where Paul would see it without rising. The stout boy studied it dreamily and, with a show of interest, turned to his friend.

"What is it?" he demanded with an effort.

Fred swelled his chest and answered in the prideful tone of a successful collector.

"It's a Florida wolf! There are n't many of them left nowadays, let me tell you; and for rarity they're equal to the panther! Great day, Fat, if we *have* lost out on the parrakeets, we've managed to secure two animals the record of whose presence is almost as valuable to naturalists as the parrakeets! Our trip to

the Everglades has n't been barren, by a long shot!"

"Whew!" breathed Paul, showing distinct signs of revival; "a Florida wolf! Whoever would have thought it? And isn't he a beaut? Here, let's see him!"

The animal was similar in shape to the ordinary western or gray wolf, though perhaps a trifle smaller. It had the same savage jaw and sly canine expression, which even death could not eradicate. Its hair, instead of being gray like that of the timber wolf, was dark almost to blackness, and served to give it its common name of black wolf.

"It's not so wonderful, after all, that they should be found here," Fred admitted, while the other blinked at the creature in semi-somnolent wonder. "They're probably a species distinct from the gray wolf that used to inhabit all our Western forests. The black wolves are known still to exist—rather sparsely, though—here in the Everglades. The State, I think, still has a bounty on their scalps."

Paul was striving hard to keep his eyes

open and his dazed interest up. "But how did you happen to run across this chap?" he inquired.

Fred vented a soft chuckle. "I did n't," he said. "It ran across *me*. Want to hear about it?" At a sleepy nod from the other he continued: "Well, after you left I built a fire and cooked the rabbit—which, by the way, was n't much good; and then, as it was growing dark, I lay down by the fire. There was n't anything else to do, so I tried to go to sleep, but, as you know yourself, the mosquitos were out in full force and I could n't catch a wink. Crawling over to the smoke, however, helped a bit, and presently I fell into a doze."

"Just like me now," murmured Paul, his head nodding forward on his chest.

"Here, you sleepy-head," the other grinned, "keep awake until you hear the rest of my story. It must have been about midnight, judging from the way the fire had died down, when the most blood-curdling sound I have ever heard aroused me. It was like one of those siren whistles which blow the noon-hour on the Hudson, only deeper and more quaver-

ing, and it sure did cause my hair to stand up. For a few moments I sat there like a ninny, afraid to move a finger, half sure that it had been a dream and yet afraid that the slightest move would make it a reality.

“And a reality it was. The wail was repeated; there could be no doubt of its reality, let me state! I grabbed up my gun and just sat there, shaking all over. For a long time dead silence followed, and then my ears caught a rustle in the grass a few yards off. It was pretty dark in these woods, and I could see nothing.

“Reaching out a hand, I tossed some wood on the fire and soon had the satisfaction of a bright blaze. And then it was that I discovered a pair of large, blue-green eyes staring out of the night. Panther, I thought, and wondered if they ever attacked human beings. I shoved a couple of buck-shot cartridges into the gun and sat there, awaiting developments. There was nothing else to do. I could n’t run, and it would n’t have done me any good if I could.

“After a while I got to thinking. If that

howl came from a panther it was different from any cat howl I had ever heard. You remember, you and I have heard the cry of a jaguar more than once in our lives, and as the Florida panther is pretty close akin to that beast, I could n't reconcile the two. No, I decided, it could n't be a panther. Then what was it? I could n't for the life of me think. I'd forgotten all about there being a few wolves down here.

"Satisfied that it was n't a cat of any kind, I thought it might be a bear, but I had enough sense to know that they have n't a voice like that. I was at a loss, and my curiosity commenced to get the upper hand. 'It's some sort of animal,' I said to myself, 'and with buck-shot at twenty yards, I can't possibly miss. So here goes.'

"With that I pointed my old blunderbuss and fired. I had got myself so worked up that I was bound to see what the creature was. Well, I saw!

"The wolf, as I discovered it was a moment later, uttered a piercing yelp and bounded squarely at the blaze. The beast was dead

and that was its death-spring, but I did n't know that. I fell back with a yell and, by mistake, pulled the other trigger, causing the gun to go off in the air.

"It was all over, I thought, just like you did with the panther, and, grabbing the gun by the barrel, I sat up and prepared to put up what fight I could. But the wolf lay dead ten feet away, with a buck-shot square between the eyes.

"When I had made sure that it was—"

Fred ceased talking and looked at his companion. Paul was fast asleep. He had listened dazedly part way through the discourse, fighting to stay awake, but it was of no use. Nature at last had her way, and he slumbered ere half the story was done.

"Poor old chap," Fred murmured, "he's about used up. He put in an awful night and deserves all the sleep he can get. I won't bother him any more."

As there was no reason for them to return immediately to camp, Fred decided to let his chum sleep until noon. In the mean time he hobbled off in search of food, for so hasty had

been their departure yesterday that this item had been overlooked. An hour later he was back, seated beside the fire, picking the feathers from the body of a large wild turkey-gobbler.

"It was a shame to do it," he apologized to himself, tossing a handful of feathers into the fire. "At this time of year, during the breeding-season, it's a shame to shoot a turkey; but we've got to eat. I was careful to get a gobbler and not a hen, which might have chicks."

Having plucked the bird clean, he trans-fixed it with a stout green stick and began to broil it over the flames. As the delicious aroma of cooking turkey spread over the little knoll, Paul, from his bed of needles, stirred uneasily, and Fred saw an unconscious smile, of anticipation cross his face and his jaws work slowly as if in contemplation of the feast. But the fat boy continued to sleep.

Satisfied that the bird was properly cooking, Fred turned his attention to the packages brought by his chum. He picked up one and thoughtfully turned it over in his hands.

Opening it, he examined its contents. It contained a dozen tufts of plumes, snow-white and filmy lace, the spoils from the backs of half that number of birds. And each tuft contained sufficient feathers to make more than one aigret for feminine adornment, any one of which would be worth many dollars.

He tossed the paper and its contents into the fire with an exclamation of disgust, and watched one of nature's most gorgeous creations shrivel and crumple and blacken into ashes. Though it took all his fortitude to destroy such things of beauty, yet must they all go the same way as these, lest by their very presence in the world of fashion they arouse a cry for more, and thus aid further in the extermination of the wonderful creatures that bear them.

Fred picked up a second package and, without looking to see what it contained, threw it after the first. A third followed, and he held in his hands the one of smaller size. A feeling of curiosity caused him to open this; its very size and superior weight showed that it could not contain plumes, and, as his eyes fell

upon what was wrapped within, he uttered a gasp of surprise and awkwardly dropped it upon the ground.

With trembling fingers he picked up the package and, turning to his chum, roughly shook him. "Wake up, Fat!" he called in a voice ringing with excitement. "Come, wake up!"

Paul grunted and rolled over.

"Here, come on!" Fred shouted, shaking the stout lad harder.

"Aw, what's the matter?" grumbled the latter, sitting up and rubbing his eyes. "Can't you let a fellow sleep without bothering him all the time?"

"I've found something!"

"I don't care if you've found a million dollars. I'm goin' to sleep."

"No, you're not. Guess what I've found!"

"I don't care."

"Yes, you do! One of those packages you brought contained—what do you think?"

Paul groaned and sleepily muttered: "I tell you I don't care. Now, let me sleep."

"It contains the plates!" Fred shouted.

CHAPTER XXIII

RETURN TO CAMP

“IT ’s the plates!”

“What ’s that you say?”

Paul, whose head until that moment had been drooping with fatigue, straightened up with a start. The words of his chum proved as effective as a dash of cold water in the face. Fred, in triumph, albeit he visibly trembled with emotion, handed over the package.

“Here, look for yourself,” he said in a voice that he tried to hold steady.

Paul, his eyes rivaling saucers in size, stared in half-dazed wonderment at the little wooden cases with their black, opaque slides, which lay in his hands. They were the plate-holders that had held the lost plates. To make certain that the plates still reposed inside, he shook each one gently in turn.

"Well, I 'll be switched!" came in a fervent murmur from his lips, and that was all he could say, so great was his joy.

Presently, collecting his scattered wits, he cried, "They *are* the plates, Skinny!" just as if the other had not known it! "To think I lugged them around all last night and did n't know it! Old Red Whiskers did n't send them away after all."

"Of course he did n't," Fred nodded with a happy laugh. "He was fooling you all the time! If any one should ask me, I 'd say that he has lost out good and proper."

"He sure has!" Paul agreed enthusiastically. "Plumes, parrakeet skin stolen in New York, and plates! Wow, he's out of luck! We should worry now!"

Fred chuckled happily. "You've said it, Fat. The next thing to do is to get back to camp and meet Jeff. Then it will be good-bye to Red Whiskers until we meet in New York."

"Can you make it with your lame foot?"

"Surest thing you know. Foot's all right now. It won't be much trouble to do the few miles back to camp. Let's eat and then

mosey on back. We want to be there when Jeff arrives."

Although it still lacked several hours to noon, Paul no longer felt the need of sleep. He led a devastating attack on the turkey, and, in an extraordinarily few minutes, little other than bones remained of the once enormous fowl. Then, having consigned the remaining aigrets to the flames, they set out for the island camp on the slough.

As the last feather crinkled and faded in the fire, Fat turned to his companion with a triumphant smile. "There," he said; "that helps some. Red must be ravin' for his plumes just about now. Wish he would rave himself into a lunatic asylum."

Neither boy can be blamed for laughing at this sally, for they had suffered much from the wiles of their rival, and the man deserved more than the mere loss of his plumes.

"But what gets me," said Fred, as they started off into the forest, "is why he *did n't* mail the plates. He said he did, and evidently it was in his mind."

Paul shrugged his shoulders. "I 'm begin-

ning to believe he did n't think of it at all until I mentioned it on the road. When I spoke about mailing them he gave a kind of start as if he 'd forgotten something and later made a break about developing 'em, and then cut himself off short. I have a hunch that he wants one of the birds itself as evidence, and would n't rely wholly upon the plates."

"And perhaps he's right," was the moody retort. Vague misgivings were beginning to cloud Fred's mind. "How do we know he has n't drawn out the slides from the holders and exposed the plates to the light?"

"Gummy!" grunted Fat, and, halting in his tracks, faced his chum. "I never thought of that, Skinny! I bet that's just what he did do! If those plates are no good, you and I are just where we started from, with him a little in the lead. He has sense enough to know that we could claim the negatives in New York and make it pretty hot for him to prove that they were his. That's just what he's done! . . . No, I don't believe it is! Don't forget the break he made about developing 'em."

"I don't," was the grim retort, "but he's liable to say 'most anything. However, we'll know to-night when we can get back to the ranch. That's the first thing we've got to do, develop 'em ourselves."

"But," wailed Fat, "we can't go back to the ranch with that horrible possibility hangin' over us! It will give him a whole day's start, and he knows where the birds feed! Gemini, Skinny, you've taken all the joy out of life!"

"I'm afraid I have," the other acknowledged with a crooked smile. "Give me your idea of what we should do."

Paul mournfully shook his head. "We'd better stay here in the Glades until we can take more pictures, just to make certain. We'll get Jeff to remain over until to-morrow, and perhaps we'll be able to go back with him then. I'm beginning to lose faith in photographs, Skinny. Suppose that, even if Parker didn't expose 'em, the plates were no good? Suppose the birds don't show up in the picture? I'm losing my nerve, I tell you. Let's shoot a parrakeet and be done with it; there are plenty of them."

Fred pondered long on the suggestion before replying. A fresh parrakeet skin would entirely solve the difficulty. The feeding-tree of the birds was only a few miles distant.

"I 'd been thinking about it," he acknowledged, "but, Fat, by your own count there were only five; those may be all that are left in the world. No, let's stick to the camera. Besides, the plates in these holders *may* be good. We may be able to secure others this afternoon, and to-night we can develop the whole lot in the tent. Let's leave the shooting as a last resort."

"Then let's hurry back to camp," cried Paul. "Let's get the camera. Old Whiskers is probably standin' under the feeding-tree right now."

Urged by the necessity of reaching camp with the least possible delay, the two young collectors quickened their steps. In due course the egret rookery was reached, and later they crossed the meadow of the herons. Forcing a way over the brush-covered island that formed the northern boundary, they hurried to the spot where the canoe had been

left. The little vessel lay hidden in the tall grass as they had last seen it, and a moment later, paddle in hand, they drove the bow through the water-weeds which choked the slough.

As the bottom of the canoe grated on the sand that formed a portion of the shore of the farther island, the ears of its occupants caught the far-off stutter of a motor. It could only come from Jeff, returning to keep his appointment, but the car was still a full mile distant and coming slowly.

"He 's a little ahead of time," Paul declared, climbing out of the canoe and steadying it for his companion. "I did n't think he 'd make it until this afternoon, and I don 't believe it 's twelve yet. I 'm glad he 's come, though."

They hastened toward the live-oak under which stood the tent.

"We 'll get the fire going," said Fred. "and give him a snack to eat when he arrives. As for myself, after that turkey you and I consumed, I 'm not hungry."

"Neither am I," Paul agreed. "You go ahead with the fire while I load the—" He

stopped short and, with a groan as of pain, turned to his companion. "By jinks, Skinny, we *are* dumbheads!"

"What 's the matter now?"

For answer Paul silently pointed to the plate-holders that he held in his hand. There were six in all, their entire stock.

"What 's the trouble?" asked Fred curiously.

"We 're ninnies; that 's all! *We can't load these plate-holders in daylight!*"

"Oh."

Fred subsided with a grunt and weakly seated himself on a log that stood by the cold embers of the dead fire. This was the limit! Such a thought had never entered his head.

"Neither did it mine," bitterly admitted Paul. "We are candidates for the foolish club; that 's what we are! I should n't have used up all those holders yesterday. If there was only some way of making a dark-room! But there 's nothing, Skinny, nothing that will do. We 'll have to wait until to-night. A whole afternoon wasted! Oh, heck, why did n't we bring films?"

Muttering in self-disgust, Fat entered the tent where Fred could hear him rummaging around. Presently he appeared with a perplexed look on his countenance.

"What did we do with the camera?" he asked. "Didn't we leave it here?"

"Sure; put it there myself."

"Well, it's not in here now."

With an expression of annoyance, Fred rose from his log and joined his chum. "I left it on my blanket," he declared. "No one could have taken it; it must be there."

But a thorough search of all possible hiding-places failed to reveal the missing camera. They delved into everything, the hammocks, the blankets, the duffle-bags, and the boxes, but there was no sign of the black case. It had vanished as if into thin air.

"Parker again," muttered Paul, as they stepped outside the tent.

The other boy nodded. "It could n't have been the bear we saw here a couple of days ago," he agreed, "so it must have been Red Whiskers or some other man." Stooping down, he picked up a small fragment of wood,

to one side of which adhered a torn strip of black imitation leather. "And," he continued grimly, handing the fragment to Paul, "whoever took it made an end to it." The splinter had at one time formed a portion of the back of the camera.

"Aw, what's the use?" groaned poor Fat, having recognized the fragment. "We're just plumb wrecked, Skinny. Even if we had the camera, we could n't use it. I have n't a doubt now that the plates in the holders are all light-struck; though I don't see why Parker did n't just take the camera with him instead of smashin' it up."

"I don't either," condoled the other, "but we've still our guns, Fat, and we know where the birds feed."

"Right you are," Fat replied with a sudden return of confidence. "And, what's more, the plates may not really be light-struck. Fine! As soon as Jeff arrives we'll start right out to collect a single one out of that flock. I wonder what's keeping him? He ought to have been here by this time."

CHAPTER XXIV

A SUDDEN APPEARANCE

JEFF DOWN was making hard weather of it in his jitney car. He had left one of the nearer boundary-houses shortly after sunrise, with the intention of reaching the camp before noon, but one accident followed another: a blow-out, a mud-hole, a broken spring, and now, when he was hardly half a mile from his destination, another mud-hole. Here it was necessary to cut several armfuls of palmetto-leaves to make a bed in the mud on which the rear wheels of the truck would catch. All this took time.

Back at camp the boys had partly recovered from their rage at the destruction of the camera. They rebuilt the fire and waited with impatience for the arrival of Jeff.

"He ought to have been here long ago," Paul repeated for the dozenth time. "By the sound of the motor when we first stepped out

of the canoe he ought to have arrived fifteen minutes ago."

"Probably had to make a detour," Fred suggested. "You can't hear it now."

"Well, if he does n't show up in five minutes more, I move we start after the parakeets. We can leave a note tellin' him what's the matter. There's not a—"

He was interrupted by Fred, who held up his hand and turned his head in an attitude of listening. "Here he is now!" he cried. "Some one's coming through the brush; hear him?"

Both jumped up and hastened to the edge of the bushes that lined the clearing. They could hear the crackle of dried twigs trampled underfoot and the rip of briers rubbing against garments. The man evidently was in a hurry.

"Wonder why he did n't drive the car up to the island as he did the other day?" said Paul. "Ho-ho, Jeff, here we are!"

The man in the bushes hastened toward the sound of the call, and a moment later stood beside them. It was Parker.

"M-Mister Parker!" stammered Paul, gaping at the new-comer in amazement. "W-where did—"

But Parker had no time to answer questions. The boys were greeted with an angry stare, and, without a word, the man strode toward the fire. The others followed silently behind, too overcome by the unexpectedness of his arrival to venture a further remark.

Arriving in front of the tent, Parker turned and, with no preliminary words, snapped:

"Where are my plumes?"

Fred and Paul could see that his physical attitude toward them had undergone an alteration. Gone was the oily manner, the unctuous bearing, the stealthy smile. The man stood forth in his true light, an overbearing, domineering bully. His pale gray eyes held a steely gleam that hitherto had been lacking, and his short red beard bristled like the hair on the back of an Irish terrier at the scent of battle. In his hands he carried a shot-gun.

"What did you do with the plumes?" he demanded fiercely, fixing Paul with his eyes.

Fat stared at him, dumb and uncomfortable. He shifted uneasily. The suddenness of the attack found him wholly unprepared.

"The plumes, I say?" Parker again demanded.

"W-what p-plumes?" stammered the boy, striving to speak in a tone of injured innocence, but with poor success. "What plumes do you mean?"

"You don't have to be told! The plumes you stole last night! Where are they, in the tent?"

Without so much as "by your leave" he opened the flap and stepped inside. Immediately there followed through the opening a shower of blankets, boxes, bags, and everything that was there. Parker's search, if ruthless, was thorough.

For a moment after the man disappeared within the tent the lads stared after him with speechless indignation. The high-handed method which their enemy pursued, the air of proprietorship he assumed over their personal belongings, was galling to say the least,

and most irritating. The nerve of the man! His unmitigated offensiveness! And they were but two boys against his man's strength; in other words, well-nigh helpless.

"Here, Mr. Parker," Fred demurred weakly, "those are our things. Be careful of them."

"Tell me where the plumes are then," answered the rough voice from beneath the canvas. "Hel-lo, what have we here?"

Parker emerged carrying the half-dozen plate-holders, which had been left there by the boys. A triumphant look lighted his ugly face, and a malicious grin played on the bewhiskered lips. He stepped carelessly into the open and faced them.

"So you have these," he crowed, "and don't know anything about the plumes? Now watch me do a little trick."

With a flirt of the hand he drew the slides from one of the holders and permitted two of the yellow, undeveloped plates to drop out and shatter upon the ground. At this sight, the final wrecking of their hopes, Fred

and Paul sprang forward, calling desperately to him not to expose any more. Parker, who had never lost the grip on his gun, waved them back with the weapon.

"Shall I spoil the rest just as I wrecked your camera?" he demanded in a harsh tone, "or will you tell me what you did with my property?"

The lads, held back by the gun, paused, and Paul, in a sober voice, replied, "We have n't got your plumes—now."

"What do you mean—now? You don't deny that you stole them?"

"Of course not," retorted the stout lad; how he wished that their guns were not lying twenty feet off against the trunk of the live-oak! But, even had the weapons been in their hands, neither boy would have used them in a quarrel like this. Both knew the plates were not worth a human life; and Parker knew that they knew it!

"Of course not," repeated Paul. "I took them last night; but you had already taken the plates from us."

"What if I did?" snorted the man. "You

got the plates back and my plumes with them. Now tell me what's become of the feathers, or I'll open the rest of the holders."

He made a motion as if to carry out the threat, and Paul again started forward, his hands outstretched.

"Here, hold on!" he cried. "I'll tell you all about it. They're—"

But Fred interposed at this juncture, and sharply. "Will you promise to give us back the plates if we do?" he demanded. His active brain had been busy thinking a way out of the dilemma, and now the solution was close upon him. His straining ears had caught the faint purr of an approaching automobile. If they could hold Parker in play until Jeff arrived, the situation would be reversed.

At a nod from their enemy, he continued to speak, making a sign to Paul to keep quiet.

"As my friend says, they're out of our possession now, but that does n't say that we can't lay hands on them. You don't think we'd keep them around camp where they might be discovered by some one who would

inform the authorities that we have them, do you?"

A sneer crossed Parker's face at the mention of the authorities, but he said nothing and listened as Fred went on: "Yes, you can laugh if you wish, but we can't afford to. Such a collection of feathers would be hard to explain away to any one who happened to see them. We're not anxious to get into trouble that way. Our reputations as naturalists are at stake, and if—"

Fred, who had been talking at random in order to use up time, paused to take breath. The stutter of the motor could now be heard by all with distinctness, and Parker began to show signs of uneasiness.

"Got the car out of the mud, I'm afraid," he muttered to himself, and then aloud, "Cut out all the missionary talk and show me where the plumes are hidden!"

"Put the plates on the ground, then, and follow me," commanded Fred, with alacrity.

"I'll keep them, thanks," was the grim response, "and you had better hurry up if you

know what's good for you. Here, Jenkins, you come along, too," he added, as Paul made a motion to draw back in the direction of the approaching car.

Because the man still held the plate-holders and thereby the whip-handle, there was nothing for Fat to do but obey. Fred led the way past the fire toward a clump of palmettos, about twenty yards off, near the spot where Jeff had stopped the truck on the day of their arrival. They could hear a car, sputtering angrily at the deadfalls and the thickets that beset its passage and slowed its progress, not a quarter of a mile away.

"Hurry up!" shouted Parker in an agitated voice. Apprised by Paul that the creek led past their camp, he had managed to hack a passage through the head of the fallen tree that had barred the boy's progress on the previous day, and without difficulty had located the camp in his boat before their arrival. But from the spot where Fred now had led him it would take at least two minutes to reach the boat and be free of

the camp; and the car he had seen mired in a far-off meadow might be upon him at any instant.

"Get a move on you!" he cried. "I 've got to be getting away from here. If you don't locate the plumes in thirty seconds, smash go your plates!"

Fred increased his pace, and, at the edge of the palmettos, casting a meaning glance at his chum, he turned to face the bully. This was their only chance. Jeff would be with them in five minutes, and they must hold Parker long enough to regain possession of the holders. That was their only objective. The man himself meant nothing to them.

"Mr. Parker," said Fred, boldly facing him, "the plumes have been destroyed. The man in that car is the local sheriff. You had better give up the holders."

As the significance of Skinny's words went home, Parker took a step backward, half from amazement, half from fear. At that instant both lads sprang.

CHAPTER XXV

VICTORY

PARKER was not a large man, as men go, and his muscular development might not be considered great, but for all that he was no mean antagonist for two half-grown boys. Fred was thin and wiry and light of weight, and Paul was stout and slow of movement; both lads were strong for their age—a clean life out of doors had hardened their muscles—but it needed more than their combined strength to enable them to emerge victorious from a struggle against such odds. The object of the attack, moreover, was to obtain possession of the remaining plate-holders and to keep the man busy until the arrival of Jeff.

When the man stepped back at the sudden disclosure by Fred of the fate of the plumes, Paul took a stride in his direction, and, be-

fore Parker realized what had happened, had jerked the shot-gun from his grasp. With a flirt of the wrist he sent it flying into the clump of palmettos. Fred at the same instant leaped for the holders, which Parker still carried in his other hand. So unexpected was the attack that the boy became possessed of the plates as easily as his chum had the gun.

But there the tide of success turned. Recovering from his astonishment, Parker seized Fred by the shoulder and with a sudden twist threw him flat on his face. The plate-holders went smashing to the ground. Paul, bending low, hurled himself at the man's legs and, by a hard, clean, flying tackle, upset him. Thereafter the boy clung for dear life to those threshing limbs, while Fred, rising to a kneeling position, flung his body at the red tousled head.

Parker met the rush of the lighter youth with a blow of his fist that sent him crashing backward square upon the heap of plate-holders. A second wrench sufficed to free his right leg from Paul's grip, and that unfortunate person received a blow on the head

that caused him to see a whole constellation. But Fat hung on like grim death, and, to prevent a repetition of the blow, crawled higher up on the body of the man until he was able to seize him around the waist.

Fred, with venom in his heart, bounded up from the wreckage of the precious plates. Red Whiskers had finished *them*, and he would suffer for it! Seeing that the man was fully occupied with Fat, the lighter chap ran around the struggling pair and, awaiting his chance while Parker aimed a blow of his fist at the face of defenseless Paul, he stepped in and grasped the arm before it could fall. With a quick wrench he brought it back past the red head and held it pinioned there.

The man uttered an exclamation of pain and flung back his free arm, which caught Fred an ineffectual glancing blow on the shoulder. Paul seized this opportunity to climb farther up on the man's body, but, in so doing, loosened his grip. Parker gave a savage twist to his body, and the boy was flung clear. Reaching back with his free hand, the

man seized Fred by the collar and jerked him forward. Then, drawing back his arm, he prepared to deliver a blow that would put a quietus to the boy.

The blow never fell. A motor-car roared to a standstill beside the struggling trio, and a man leaped out. Parker felt a powerful hand fall on his own collar, and he was dragged unceremoniously to his feet. Fred, suddenly released, staggered back and stood breathing heavily beside his chum, who had risen.

"Hyar, yuh diamond-back!" Parker heard a voice bellow in his ear, and in no very pleasant tones. He realized that the game was up. The hand tightened on his collar and shook him until his teeth rattled.

"Yuh miserable skunk!" Jeff roared, giving him another shake for good measure. "I 've a good mind to wring yo' neck! What kind of a man are yuh, tryin' to thrash two boys?"

Turning to the breathless spectators, he demanded: "What shall I do with the varmint? Want him shot?"

"Better not," advised Fred, who had suffi-

ciently recovered his breath to speak. "Hang on to him, Jeff, until we get our wind back; that 's all."

"What 's he been doin' to yuh?"

"Stealing our stuff," replied Paul, who was now able to join in the conversation.

"The viper!" Jeff again shook his prisoner.

Parker regained his presence of mind. He decided to put a bold face on the matter.

"Here, you!" he snarled at Jeff in a threatening voice. "Here, let go my collar at once! If you don't it will be the worse for you! Do you know who I am?"

"Yes, suh, I do," Jeff coolly retorted. "Yuh 're what is known in this hyar bit o' country as a low-down, squirmy diamond-back, a rattlesnake. An' listen hyar, my friend, modulate yo' voice when yuh speak."

"These boys attacked me," Parker whined, at once changing his tactics. "I am innocent of any wrong intentions toward them. They stole property belonging to me, and I came to their camp to get it back."

"That 's false!" burst simultaneously from

the lips of both lads. "This is what happened, Jeff," and they went on to detail their dealings with the man.

"And look at the plates!" Paul concluded, with a break in his voice, pointing at the wreckage that lay at their feet half trampled into the soil. "All our work has gone for nothing. Every single plate-holder is broken. There's not a good plate left!"

He broke off, his voice faltering with discouragement and rage, and Fred completed the explanation. "Our only hope remained in snatching them from Parker," he said, "but he threw me down among them, and that was the finish of the plates."

"What have yuh got to say to that?" Jeff demanded of his captive. "What are yuh goin' to do to help 'em out fo' the plates?"

Parker replied with a shrug of his shoulders, adding: "There's nothing I can do about it. The plates are destroyed, and I am sorry for it; but if the boys had not been so precipitate in their movements that would not have occurred. They should not have tried

to snatch them away. The plates would have been theirs in a few moments."

"Hum," said Jeff.

"They should not blame me for their destruction," continued the prisoner, thinking that he had gained a point in Jeff's sympathy. "They have continually pestered me during their entire stay here. It was only last night that one of them insulted me steadily for half an hour while he rode in a wagon with me. They are—"

"Hold on thar, yuh reptile," warned Jeff, administering another admonitory shake. "Go easy on yo' talk. Ef he insulted yuh fo' half an hour why did n't yuh throw him out? And what's this hyar about them plumes? What did yuh want to kill all them egrets fo'?"

"That's my business," was the sulky response.

"Ho-ho, it is, is it? Well, I reckon the state department up at Tallahassee will have somethin' to say about it, too."

"There's no material evidence," Parker re-

torted with a leer. "These smart boys destroyed the plumes."

"That so?" asked Jeff, turning to Paul and Fred. At a nod of assent from them, he continued, "So much the worse fo' yuh, Parker, ef that 's yo' name." Then again turning to the boys, he asked, "What are yo' plans now?"

"There 's only one thing we can do," was the moody reply from Fred. "We 'll have to shoot one of the parrakeets; that is, if Parker has n't already cleaned them out."

A cunning gleam shot into the eyes of the captive at these words. The game, he believed, was not yet lost—quite. Although the plumes were gone beyond recovery, there was still a chance of cajoling the boys out of the reward for the parrakeets. He chuckled aloud.

"You boys spoke some true words that time! What do you think I was doing all the rest of yesterday morning while you paddled back to camp? I knew the birds were there, and I shot all five. I had just sent their skins off through the mail when I met our fat friend

here in the road. So, my lads, you can kiss good-by to that five thousand dollars!"

His listeners felt a sinking sensation in their breasts, and they gazed helplessly at one another. The parrakeets were dead—shipped north! The last of the species extinct!

"W-why," stammered Paul, "why then did you visit our camp?"

"To get the plumes, of course."

"If it had been me," said the boy, "I would have gone with the skins to get the reward."

Parker shook his head. "No, sir-ee, the plumes were worth almost as much, and I wanted them both. As it is, I shall have to rest content with the reward alone."

Fred, who had been keenly watching Parker, took a step forward and faced him. "I don't believe a word you say!" he exclaimed. "Why did you smash our camera if there are no more parrakeets left to photograph? Why were you so happy upon recovering the plates?"

"I smashed the camera in revenge on you

for taking my plumes," coolly retorted the man. "The plates were hostages, as you know, for the plumes."

"Ah-hum," interrupted Jeff with a slight smile at this juncture. "I reckon this hyar discussion has gone far enough. What do yuh say to this hyar, Mistah Diamond-back?"

Thrusting a hand into one of Parker's pockets he drew forth the body of a freshly killed Carolina parrakeet.

"Before yuh construct any more tales like that," he continued, grinning at the discomfiture of his captive, "jest be sure that yuh keep all the feathers tucked in. Hyar," tossing the body to the astounded boys, "that, I reckon, belongs to yuh. Keep it in payment fo' the plates old Diamond-back hyar destroyed." Turning to the man he cried, "Now git!" and gave him a shove that sent Parker staggering toward the slough fifty yards away.

The man recovered his balance and, shaking a fist at the trio, walked toward the hidden boat. His gun lay in the bushes where it had

been flung by Paul. This the boy tossed into the car.

"There," he cried, "we'll make the Union Museum a present of that—when we get to New York. You won't need it again, Red Whiskers."

Their rival paddled down the slough, a broken man. He had lost all: the reward, the plumes, his gun with which to carry on further destruction—and his honor as a collector.

Four parrakeets flew screeching over the island. They passed not ten feet over the weaponless man's head and alighted in the live-oak above the camp. With a parting imprecation, Parker drove his paddle into the water, and the bateau carried him out of sight around the bend.

Two hours later the bus churned through the meadows in the direction of Thrasher ranch. The work of the young collectors in the Everglades, for the time being, was completed, and the return journey was made in a happy frame of mind.

Late that same night a long telegram was sent to Dr. Keene, followed the next morning by a lengthy letter that set forth in detail all that had occurred. After a consultation with Mr. Whitehouse, Fred and Paul had decided to remain at the ranch until a reply to the telegram was received, and, much to their relief, it arrived the following day. Its contents read as follows:

Parrakeet wings recovered and Partridge discharged. Your case and claim produced before officials of U. O. S. and upheld. Parker discredited. You win. Congratulations. Not necessary to have skin right away. If you wish you may remain at Thrasher with Mr. Whitehouse for two weeks as suggested. Congratulations once more.

Needless to say, the boys remained.

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